



Reincarnated as a **Sword**

WRITTEN BY
Yuu Tanaka

ILLUSTRATED BY
Llo

NOVEL





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Table of Contents

Color Inserts

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Table of Contents Page

Chapter 1: The Search for Garrus

Chapter 2: Broken Noses

Chapter 3: Open Waters

Chapter 4: Raid, Repel, Raid

Chapter 5: Sea Dragons

Chapter 6: Animals

Epilogue

Afterword

Extra Chapter: Game Night

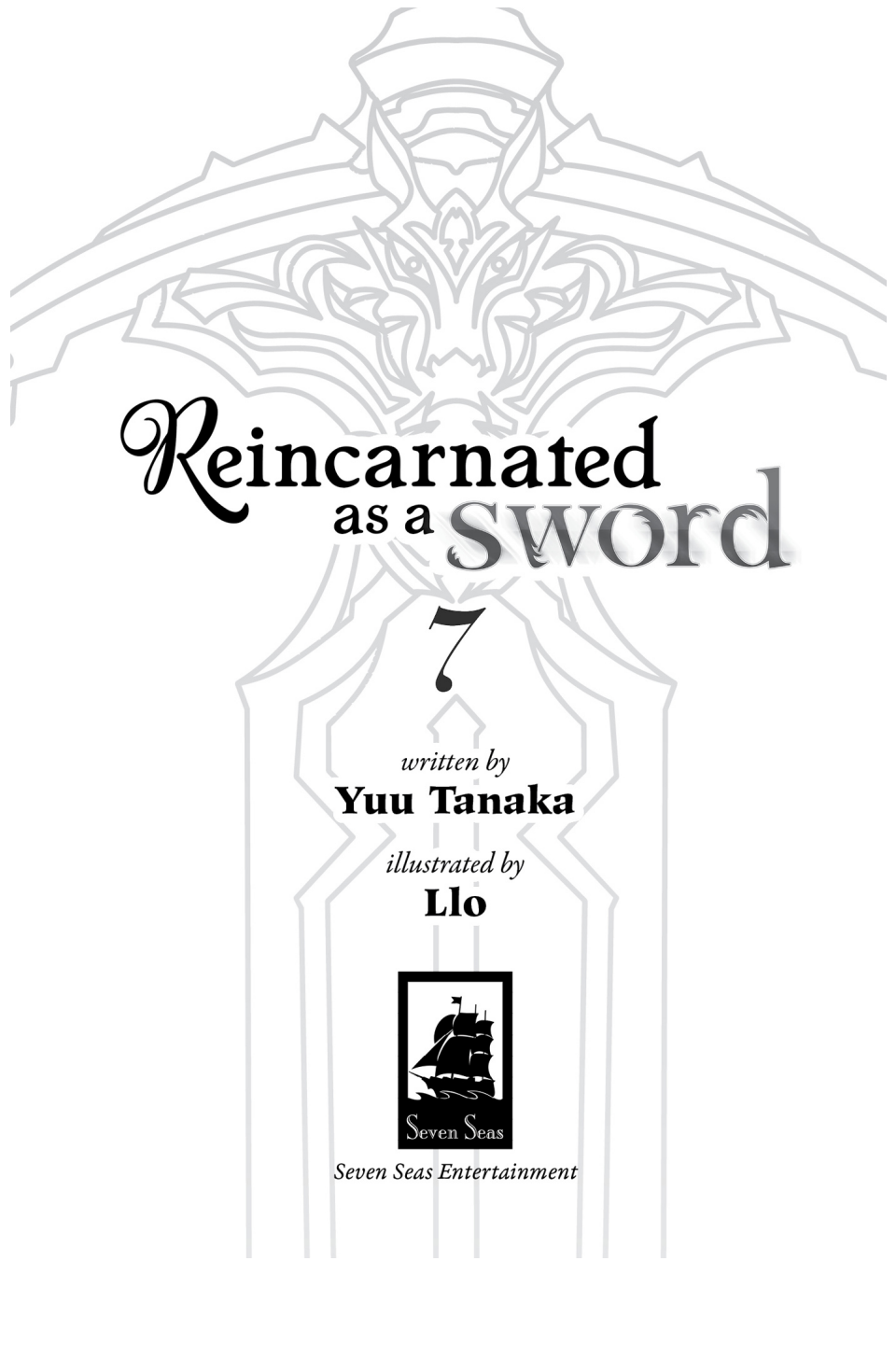
Newsletter

Reincarnated as a sword 7









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7

written by

Yuu Tanaka

illustrated by

Llo



Seven Seas Entertainment

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Illustrations by Llo

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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to

Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com.

Information regarding the distribution and purchase of

digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell

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sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Michael Rachmat

ADAPTATION: Cae Hawkmoor

COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

PROOFREADER: Chris Wolfgang, Rebecca Scoble

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein

PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis

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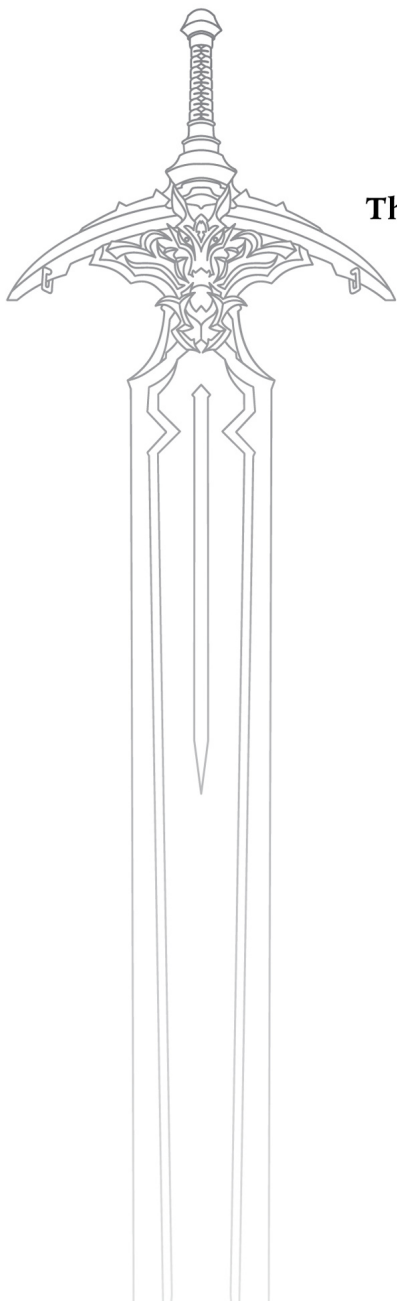
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

The Search for Garrus

CHAPTER 2

Broken Noses

CHAPTER 3

Open Waters

CHAPTER 4

Raid, Repel, Raid

CHAPTER 5

Sea Dragons

CHAPTER 6

Animals

Epilogue

EXTRA CHAPTER

Game Night

Chapter 1: The Search for Garrus

CLANG! Clang! Clang!

Alarm bells rang in the night as a large crowd of people ran toward safety. It was a normal reaction, given that a dangerous prisoner had just escaped from death row.

“Lady Miriam! We’ve received news of his last sighting!”

“Where is he?!”

“The military docks, ma’am!”

“Impossible!”

How was he at the docks already? I’d even posted more guards there!

“Carla, we’re heading down there!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

He’d managed to escape a maximum-security prison. He must’ve had help on the inside.

“Is he alone?”

“No. There are reports of him with the murderer brothers...”

“Confound it! They were in the same cell?”

“They escaped together. The guards have already suffered casualties.”

“At least we know where they’re going.”

“The Sea Dragons?”

“Valussa, to be specific. They’re still contracted. He’s going to take his Sea Dragon and run.”

The Sea Dragon-class vessels were Seedrun’s strongest battleships. We only had two actual Sea Dragons left to run them, which left only two vessels: my sister’s Warnate and my Aquois. Wishkar, my uncle’s former vessel, was currently out at sea. My fool brother’s dragon, Valussa, was being treated after the damage Fran had done to it.

“We have to stop him from boarding Valussa.”

Valussa was still hooked up to its ship and, since we couldn't get a new captain to form a contract with it, still connected to my brother. He couldn't have picked a better time to break out of jail. Stealing Valussa must've been his plan all along.

“We can't let Suarez take our Sea Dragon...!”

We left Ulmutt and ran toward Bulbola. Of course, Jet did most of the running, while Fran and I just rode on his back. The roads were beginning to look familiar. It had taken us four days to get to Ulmutt, so I was sure we would could make it back to Bulbola quicker.

As it turned out, that wasn't to be. Two days later, we were most of the way there, but we ran into something we couldn't ignore.

“H-help!”

“Eeek!”

“Gaaargh!”

Lesser Wyverns surrounded a band of merchants. The monsters were no match for us, but they were more than enough to terrify the businessmen. The sight reminded me of the Lesser Wyvern I fought back in the Demon Wolf's Garden, back when I had just reincarnated. I fought it to the point of shattering, so I could only imagine the fear the merchants were feeling. There was a whole flock of the drakes, too. Over ten, at least.

“Jet.”

“Woof.”

At Fran's signal, Jet broke into a full sprint.

“Oh gods!”

“As if those winged lizards weren't enough, there's a direwolf now, too?!”

“We're done for!”

The sudden appearance of a giant wolf threw the merchants into further panic. None of them expected help to come riding on such a

beast. They ran, although they looked like they'd given up. As panic turned into despair, they slowed down. Fran called out to reassure them.

"Friendly."

"Wait, what? A girl?"

They finally noticed Fran.

"I-Is that your wolf, little lady?"

"Hey...you're the Black Lightning Princess!"

"Hm."

They knew Fran well enough. Now that their hope had been rekindled, they ran faster. Not bad for people whose main priority was money. At least it was better than curling up into a ball and crying.

"You guys need help?"

"Yes!"

"Please!"

"W-we'd really appreciate it!"

I wasn't expecting much of a reward, but leaving them to die would haunt me in my sleep.

"I get to keep the materials."

"Of course!"

"We'll pay you!"

"Not handsomely maybe, but..."

"Shut up, you idiot!"

"What if she leaves us to fend for ourselves?!"

"Guys, she's a high-rank adventurer! Do you really think we have enough money to pay for her services!"

"W-we may not have enough money *now*, but that can be arranged..."

The men were hopeful enough to start arguing. Was it all an act to get a price cut? It didn't matter. I would've saved them for free, but if we did that, we risked getting underestimated in the future. If word got out that the Black Lightning Princess had a soft spot for innocents in trouble, a lot of not-so-innocent people would take advantage. But there

was one problem: we didn't know the going rate for saving people from immediate danger.

What do we do, Teacher?

Quoting a random price would only cause problems down the line. We'll put aside the issue for now.

"Pay me later. In the meantime, you can discuss how much you think being saved is worth. I'll take that as payment."

"Huh? Uhh—"

"Now get going. You might get caught up in this."

I buffed us with support magic and we ran faster. Before the merchants had a chance to open negotiations, Fran and Jet left them in the dust.

"Wait—"

"What should we—"

"Can we get a baseline price—"

Even as we left them behind, they were still shouting at Fran for a quote. I hoped they could settle that themselves, since we had no idea...

Maybe we were being too harsh. In effect, a C-Rank adventurer had asked how much their lives were worth. Pay Fran too little, and they risked rumors of their insincerity and cheapness, which would really spell the end of their business careers. Perhaps we should've told them to pay us at market rate.

Well, it was too late to worry about that now. We had Lesser Wyverns to kill. The monsters were little more than wild animals, and they felt Fran and Jet's presence as an immediate threat. They stopped chasing after the merchants and hovered over us, glaring down from their vantage point. Whether they charged us or fled, they knew they were dead.

"Teacher."

What's up?

"There's something I wanna try."

What?

"Kanna Kamuy."

Uh-huh...

We had tested the skill in dungeons before, but never in actual combat. When we'd used it at the fighting tournament, it was restricted by a barrier. Now was a good time to see what it could do.

"Let's fire a shot and see what happens."

Alright. I'll get it ready, so make sure those drakes don't get away.

"Hm."

Kanna Kamuy was a Level 10 thunder spell, and very difficult to control. The slightest mistake in the incantation and I'd have to start all over again. That was probably why my version was significantly more powerful than Fran's. The casting only took half the time for me, too. I had Speed Thinking, Double Mind, and Mage to thank for that.

There was one other problem. Casting Kanna Kamuy gave Fran fierce headaches. The first time she tried it, she got a nosebleed. The load it placed on her brain was just too much. I never wanted Fran to use it again. A spell which took such a great toll on her mind sounded like it might also shave a couple years off her life. Which meant that I was on Kanna Kamuy duty. As Fran and Jet Intimidated the Lesser Wyverns to prevent them from escaping, I focused my mana.

Okay, I'm good to go!

"Hm. The merchants are at a safe distance, too."

There was no threat of them being caught in the explosion. I released the spell.

Kanna Kamuy!

A brilliant pillar of white lightning fell on the Lesser Wyverns. The spell's destructive power was more visible out in the open. The light split the sky open and even seemed to singe the clouds. The flash was followed by an appropriately loud crack of thunder. The lightning was bright enough to blind, and its thunder loud enough to deafen. It caused a rumbling that reverberated to the pit of your stomach, like the descent of a furious thunder god.

Fran and Jet covered their ears, but the merchants could only shriek in fear. When the flash of lightning dissipated, Fran and Jet tilted their heads to look at what was left of the battlefield. I would've done the same, if I still had a head.

"Huh?"

“Woof?”

Oh?

The Lesser Wyverns were completely obliterated.

I guess that was too much.

There wasn't a trace of them, not even ashes. All that was left was a crater, fifteen meters in circumference. The center of it had crystallized into glass, and the surrounding forest wasn't spared from the lightning, either. What wasn't disintegrated was burnt to a crisp and scattered by the explosive force of the thunderbolt. Using this spell in a city would spell disaster for hundreds of people.

Let's not use this unless we absolutely have to.

If we had allies with us, they definitely would've been caught up in it. Even the merchants didn't escape completely unscathed. The loud blast certainly damaged their eardrums and they were screaming in terror. Fran hurried to their side to administer healing magic.

I don't see any crystals left, either.

“What a waste.”

“Woof.”

Jet barked in disappointment, having been denied fresh (or even burnt) wyvern meat.

“You okay?”

“...”

“...”

After Fran had healed the merchants, they got back up and surveyed their surroundings.

“Oh, uhh...”

“Thank you...”

“So about that payment...”

It took a while before they came back to their senses, and their faces were still pale. The spell was too intense for a civilian. Given the devastation we'd caused, there would be no bargaining. The merchants were probably still frightened for their lives.

“I'm so sorry, but the three of us only have 50,000G on us right

now...”

That was quite a lot, but I guess it was necessary considering their trade. 50,000 didn't sound like much to them—employing a high-rank adventurer must cost a lot more. Fran beat an A-Rank in the tournament, so she must have been worth more than the average C-Rank. Still, she consented to the price.

“I'll take it.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Hm. You still got hit by my spell.”

Our experiment had hurt them, even though we managed to heal them in time. Having threatened their lives, it was only reasonable that we gave them a discount.

“Th-thank you very much.”

“You saved us big time!”

“We mean it!”

The businessmen thanked us, despite having to hand over all the money they had. The market rate must've been a lot. We parted ways and went ahead of them, still on the same highway. We planned to clear the way, not as an after-sales service, but just so they wouldn't get in trouble again.

As we walked along the road, we found people marching from Bulbola to Ulmutt. The squadron looked too lightly armed to be knights, but they were far too uniform to be an adventuring party. Their discipline suggested that they were not your run-of-the-mill bandits, either. But they were certainly armed, and broadcast a violent atmosphere.

Well, what now? Hopefully, they would let us pass without batting an eye... But things might get hairy if they decided to pick a fight.

“Do we take a detour?”

No, they might misunderstand that.

We were already in their sights. Dropping off the main road would make it look like we were running away. We didn't know what they wanted, but any suspicious moves on our part might provoke them.

Just be ready for a fight.

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

Jet slowed down, and we walked toward the mysterious squadron. As we drew closer, the unit readied their weapons. I even spotted an archer among them. They were wise enough not to attack on sight, mainly because we weren't broadcasting any murderous intent. The unit wasn't particularly strong, so they had every reason to be cautious. Each individual was around the same level as an E-Rank. Their leader might be on the cusp of hitting D-Rank.

Their gaze was fixed more on Jet than Fran. Fair enough. A powerful direwolf would give even the sleepest of vanguards cause for concern. Jet was nothing more than a cute big dog to us, but to the unacquainted he was a gigantic menacing wolf.

Fran, get off of Jet and start walking. We don't want to spook them.

“Hm. Got it.”

Jet, get in the shadows.

“Woof.”

Jet shrank and melted into Fran's shadow, eliciting a startled cry from the squadron. Fran walked toward them. I readied myself to teleport us above them and rain down magical death if things went south.

Fran kept walking. Fifty, then forty, then thirty, then twenty meters. As we passed them, the leader of the squad called out to Fran.

“H-hey! You!”

“Hmm?”

“Where'd that wolf go?! A-anyway, how dare you just walk by us without saying a word!”

“Hi. Bye.”

“Get back here, girl!”

Oh boy, here we go again. What should we do? They were weak enough to be cut down and forgotten about, but...we still didn't know who they were.

“You've never heard of the Dimmel Squad?”

No, of course not. Were all mercenaries like this? Fran frowned;

their behavior reminded her of the Blue Pride group we encountered back in Ulmutt. I don't think we'd met a single decent person among the mercenary class. I supposed it was a last-ditch occupation, which attracted the attention of outcasts from all walks of life.

The man leaped from one question to another, starting from Fran's identity, to Jet's whereabouts, to what lay ahead on road. He was getting increasingly frustrated at Fran's flippant treatment, speaking louder with every word.

What now, Teacher?

Hmm. Just ignore him, I guess.

Just as we were about to move on, something stirred behind the vanguard. Backup had arrived, and there were enough of them now to present a mild threat. I charged my mana and observed the situation carefully. If it came to it, we might have to wipe them out.

"What's the holdup, Vasque?"

"Dad—Boss. I was interrogating a foreign element."

"Interrogate? Our job is to exterminate the Lesser Wyverns that are terrorizing the highway. Did you find a bandit scout?"

"Not exactly, no..."

"Then what is it? We didn't come out here to play!"

"I'll squeeze whatever information I can out of her, just wait a minute!"

Squeeze information out of Fran, you say? Interesting. I'd love to see you try. We could kill him and use the rest as target practice for Fran's thunder magic. She looked like she was on board with the idea. She squinted and dropped into a ready position. As soon as the fighting started, she'd lop off Vasque's head. After that, the squad would scatter.

Their leader sensed our growing battle urge. He pushed his son out of the way and stepped forward. Did he want to see who his enemy was? A single glance at us and he turned pale. The man turned around and punched his son squarely in the face.

"Gah! What are you doing, Dad!"

"You idiot! You stupid, stupid idiot!"

"Urkk! Gah!"

He followed up with enough kicks to knock Vasque unconscious. The other mercenaries could only stare at him in confusion. We could relate. Did he think Fran was nobility?

“I am truly sorry for what my foolish subordinate did! We are no threat to you! Please forgive us!”

The men were even more startled now—their leader was on his knees, apologizing as if his life depended on it. He must have mistaken Fran for somebody important.

“On your knees, you lot! Now! Or I will cut you where you stand!”

The order was absurd, but the threat was not. The other men slowly got to their knees and bowed. The gesture was obviously insincere, but we dealt with it.

“I truly apologize for the rudeness of my men, Black Lightning Princess.”

I guess he knew exactly who he was talking to. Fran was famous enough now that mercenaries didn’t want to get on her bad side. At the very least, their boss knew that she could wipe them out with little more than a gesture.

“Th-that’s her?”

“They say she shows no mercy to her enemies...”

“Mess with her and you’ll get turned to dust...”

The mercenaries’ dissent soon dissipated. The Black Lightning Princess, for her part, did not care a tussle.

“Can I go now?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Bye then.”

“We wish you safe passage!”

The mercs sent us off with uncharacteristic politeness. I guess we could let them off, since they didn’t do Fran any harm. But why was the leader so terrified? Sure, Fran was stronger than all of them combined, but his fear seemed a little disproportionate. I wondered what kind of rumors were already circulating about us.

A day later, we arrived at our destination.

It's been a while, Bulbola.

"Hm."

"Woof!"

A month later, and we were back. We passed through the gate and walked through the city. A month shouldn't have been enough for any significant changes, but Bulbola was different. The town was nearly destroyed during the Fiend outbreak the last time we were here, but there was barely any rubble left. The repairs must've gone exceedingly well. It didn't even look like a giant archfiend had blown up half the city.

Let's start by visiting our acquaintances.

Our main goal was to get on a boat to the Beastman Nation, but it wasn't like we had to go right away. We had enough time to visit our friends.

"Hmm!"

Fran nodded enthusiastically. First stop, the Chefs' Guild.

I wonder if Meckam's in.

"Hrmph."

Come on, you still don't like the guy?

Fran had yet to forgive Meckam for his initial harsh review of my curry. He looked like he walked out of the pages of a cooking manga, so I didn't mind him. We converted him in the end, so there was no more reason for Fran to bear a grudge. Was she still upset?

"I'll show him that your curry is universally delicious."

The way she phrased it made it sound like the gourmet was a rival. Unfortunately for Fran, Old Meckam wasn't in. Fortunately for me, it saved us the trouble of another argument.

Too bad.

"Hmm..."

Fran was disappointed. Just as we were about to leave, the receptionist called out.

“Fran, may I have a moment of your time?”

“Hmm?”

“Since you and your teacher qualify for a promotion, I would like to update your guild card.”

I forgot that Fran was registered in the Chefs’ Guild. We only did it so we could participate in the cooking contest. But why had we qualified for a promotion? If placing in the cooking contest was enough to rank us up, we should’ve gotten the promotion before we left. I didn’t remember doing anything else of note, either. Fran shared my bewilderment.

“How come?”

“The curry recipe the two of you developed has exploded. It’s only a matter of time until it spreads all over the country.”

“Wow.”

That was wonderful news. Fran was glad to hear that she could soon have curry wherever she went, and I was sure variations of my recipe were already being developed. I could use them as inspiration to create new recipes, which meant Fran could enjoy even more curry. Selling our recipe to the Lucille Trade Association was the right choice.

“Your economic and cultural achievements have qualified you for the Silver rank.”

I felt a little awkward about it, since all I did was copy an old Earth recipe. But there were no drawbacks to the promotion, and so we gladly accepted it.

“Here.”

“You have both of your cards on hand, I see.”

“Teacher asked me to take care of his.”

“May I pass your teacher’s card to you, then?”

“Sure.”

Fran exchanged our cards for two silver ones. The Chefs’ Guild was still in the analog era, and the cards didn’t have a trace of mana in them. Then again, maybe the Adventurer’s Guild just had a monopoly on fancy cards.

“Should you decide to conduct business in Bulbola, you will

receive the full support of the Chefs' Guild."

"Alright."

"However, if you don't conduct any activities or develop any new recipes, you will eventually get demoted, so be careful."

I see. Good thing we came here today. I didn't mind getting demoted, but since we'd just gotten to Silver, it seemed like a waste of time.

Teacher?

Hmm. Let's register a new recipe.

Our curry gave us enough points to get us to Silver, so perhaps a new recipe would work just as well. But which one?

What do you think we should give them, Fran?

Fran was a perfect measure for what the inhabitants of this world liked. Her tongue was reliable—if her favorite food was spreading, I was sure that whatever she picked would enjoy similar success.

Hmm...katsudon?

Katsudon...right.

It was another of Fran's favorites. Fried foods were a rarity in this world, especially those that came with eggs on top. Soy sauce was also a rare condiment and it was difficult to substitute. I certainly hadn't seen anything that came close to mimicking it.

I took Fran's suggestion and we handed the recipe to the Chefs' Guild. I could already see chefs deciding how to season the katsu. It could easily become as varied as curry.

The receptionist seemed to be a gourmet herself, and inspected the ingredients with great interest.

"This...this is amazing. Innovative, but with so much room for variation. A dish that uses rice and shoyu... These are not common here. Wonderful. Shall I register this recipe for you and your teacher?"

Not only was the concept for katsudon strange, but she'd complimented us on our use of the exotic ingredients. An increase in demand for rice and shoyu might even create a minor boom in the economy.

"Hm. Please."

“Very well, I’ll register it into our database immediately. I have a feeling this is going to be in popular demand.”

“You think so?”

“Yes! You’ve established your names already, so there are a lot of chefs waiting for the next big thing. I daresay katsudon is going to take Bulbola by storm!”

I hoped so. I wasn’t going to tell her, but I had a hunch that imaginative cooks would soon combine katsudon and curry to make katsu curry. We left the Chefs’ Guild, and she sent us off with a big smile on her face.

That took longer than expected. Where to next?

“The orphanage.”

Oh yeah. We should drop by and say hello.

I was curious to know what had happened after we told Amanda about them. Hopefully the kids were doing a lot better, but we were shocked when we arrived. The formerly rundown house was no more. The building was freshly renovated. In fact, it looked like a whole new complex. The fence was a lot sturdier, and the garden was beautiful and inviting with freshly planted flowers and trees.

“Jet!”

“Fran!”

Good thing the kids were still the same. They ran over to us with the same innocent smiles. Their clothes were in a better state of repair this time. Everything fitted perfectly, and the fabric was no longer riddled with moth-eaten holes. Good old Amanda. She really didn’t hold back when kids were involved.

“You’re back!”

“Let’s play!”

“Jet! Let me fluff you!”

The kids still remembered us. They had been playing in the garden and immediately asked Fran to join the fun.

“Why hello, Fran.”

“Io.”

Having heard the commotion, a woman stepped out of the

orphanage. Io was the orphans' caretaker. She acted as a kind sister to the children and was also a talented cook.

"Thank you so much for your help. The kids are so much happier and we're doing a lot better now."

Io bowed deeply, though we insisted that we didn't do anything. Amanda was the one who saved the orphanage.

"Perhaps, but Lady Amanda told me about how you asked her to help us."

"That's the only thing I did."

"And the kids love your teacher's curry recipe. We have curry day once a week and everyone looks forward to it."

"We love Ms. Io's curry!"

"It's super delish!"

Io could make garbage soup taste like consommé. I was curious how much better her cooking was now that she had access to decent ingredients. Curry day was tomorrow, and Fran asked if she could join. Io agreed to prepare portions for both her and Jet. This was going to be good.

"I'll be back tomorrow."

"We'll be waiting for you."

"See you soon!"

"Bye, Jet!"

"Hm."

Fran left the orphanage with a bounce in her step. She was looking forward to eating with the orphans.

Can it be tomorrow already?

It's still the afternoon, Fran.

What now? We could track down a ship at the LTA. The only other people Fran knew in this town were adventurers, most of whom were still in Ulmutt for the tournament.

"Garrus."

Right. We should go look for him.

We promised that we would see him again when we got to

Ulmutt, but the Bulbola reconstruction effort got in the way of that. That said, there was a good chance that the blacksmith was still in town. If he'd packed up and gone back to Ulmutt, we would have run into him already. There was only one road connecting the two cities.

But how do we look for him?

"Adventurer's Guild?"

That could work.

Adventurers were always looking for a skilled blacksmith. Maybe we could get information on his whereabouts there. We could also visit the Blacksmiths' Guild, since Garrus would need to check in to work in Bulbola.

Let's hit the Adventurer's Guild first.

"Got it."

The guild was like home to Fran now. She had placed third in the fighting tournament and was acquainted with Gammod, the local Guildmaster. They wouldn't turn her away.

We were on our way to the guildhouse when Fran and Jet suddenly stopped to look at the surroundings. Was there something amiss? They looked unsettled.

What's wrong?

"I smell curry!"

"Woof!"

That explained it. Bulbola was in the middle of a curry boom, and street food stalls were getting in on the action. Fran floated to it like a bee to a fragrant flower. Her entire being longed for curry. If someone set a curry trap, I was sure she would willingly fall for it.

"Welcome!"

The stall was definitely selling curry but, strangely enough, they only had chopsticks.

"What's this?"

"This here's our specialty curry noodles!"

The cooks of Bulbola had already reached the noodle phase of curry development. Judging by the look of it, they had cooked the noodles in the broth. I wondered if the noodles would get too soft, but I

was still interested. Fran wasted no time in buying two bowls—one for her and one for Jet.

“Here you go, Jet.”

“Bark!”

They dug right into their afternoon snack.

“Slurp.”

“*Munch munch.*”

Fran lapped it up without so much as pausing.

Aah, don't lick your lips! Wipe them with your napkin! And Jet has curry all over his muzzle, too! Well, I guessed he could be excused for eating the only way he knew how. I knew Fran liked the noodles, but I asked her anyway.

How is it?

“Good.”

“Woof woof!”

The noodles weren't too soft?

“Hm.”



They must have been specially made for the curry. An extended interview revealed that the noodles had the texture of shirataki or glass noodles. Very impressive. I didn't think they'd develop such an interesting dish so fast! I couldn't wait to see what concoctions the other shops were selling.

We made our way to the Adventurer's Guild, stopping at some food stalls here and there. Fran and Jet were satisfied with every purchase. In fact, they were so entranced that what was supposed to be a thirty-minute walk became an hour-long stroll.

We're finally here. Time to get some info.

"Hm."

The guildhouse was bustling with activity. There were still adventurers who gave Fran weird looks because of her age, but she held them in equal contempt.

"Got a minute?"

"Sure, how may I help you?"

While the receptionist didn't know Fran, her etiquette was perfect. I couldn't help but appreciate the guild's standards.

"I'm looking for someone."

"I see..."

The receptionist paused and gave it some thought. This wasn't really a job for adventurers, but she still helped us.

"Would you like me to introduce you to an adventurer who is likely to have information? You can negotiate the rates later."

An informant adventurer? We would love to know one regardless. It sounded shady, but I was sure the guild endorsed him for a reason.

"That works. Can I see him now?"

"Of course. He's over there."

The receptionist motioned to a lone adventurer who was standing a couple feet behind us. He seemed to have been listening, waiting for his name to come up. He grinned and greeted us with a casual wave.

A quick Identify revealed that he was a middle-aged scout. While lacking in combat prowess, he more than made up for it in detection, stealth, and negotiation. The adventurer definitely looked like he would

make a reliable informant.

“Hey there. Heard you’re looking for someone.”

“Hm.”

“I mostly work the capital, but I’ve got a pretty good handle on the happenings in Bulbola.”

Mostly worked in the capital? I didn’t know adventurers could do that. If the capital was as big as Bulbola, they could make a pretty nice living there.

“Anyway, let’s get a table so we can talk. By the way, the name’s Reggs.”

“Fran.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Reggs sat us down in a corner of the guildhouse. He was casual, without underestimating Fran.

“So who are you looking for?”

“Garrus the blacksmith.”

“Aaah, the esteemed blacksmith himself, eh?”

“You know him? I want to know where he is.”

Reggs recognized the name, at least. We might be able to meet old Garrus sooner than I thought. The only thing left to negotiate was the price.

“Name your price.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Hmm? Why not?”

“One, I don’t have valuable information about Garrus—certainly not enough to charge the Black Lightning Princess. Besides, I’ve already come out ahead in this deal simply by making your acquaintance.”

No wonder he was so polite. The informant was worth his salt. He could probably hear faster than he could run. Reggs proceeded to tell us what he knew about Garrus.

“He was definitely in Bulbola ten days ago.”

“You’re sure of this?”

“Yeah. He was doing maintenance on the Guildmaster’s

equipment.”

“I see.”

Garrus had taken a contract with the Adventurer’s Guild itself, but no one knew where he went after that. Reggs thought that the blacksmith had already left Bulbola.

“But he wasn’t in Ulmutt.”

“You’ve had no contact with him, either?”

“Hm.”

“I see. There are a few possibilities.”

Reggs counted them one by one on his fingers. First, there was the chance that something had happened to Garrus between Bulbola and Ulmutt. Like being attacked by monsters or robbed by bandits.

“But the highway was crowded thanks to the fighting tournament, and the road had more patrols posted on it than usual. I find it hard to believe that no one’s managed to spot him.”

Besides, Garrus was well trained in Hammer Mastery and Fire Magic. His hammer wasn’t just for smithing.

Another possibility was that something happened to him in Bulbola. He was an expert blacksmith, which could make him the target of slavers or underground syndicates.

Next, there was a chance that Garrus had undertaken some kind of confidential contract. The old dwarf tended to take jobs that pleased him, but maybe he was approached by a powerful noble or the royal family. He would have a difficult time refusing them, even if he wanted to. If that were the case, he might not be allowed to communicate with the outside at all.

Finally, he could just be swamped with work and forgot to get in touch with us. A plausible situation for a prolific craftsman like Garrus.

“I’ll look into it,” said Reggs. “Give me a day.”

“Thanks. Anything I can do to help?”

“Not really... I do my best work when people don’t see me coming. But do you know our Guildmaster, by any chance?”

“Hm.”

“You could ask them for information. And ask at the Blacksmiths’

Guild, too. No digging or espionage required.”

Reggs would probably do the digging for us, once Fran got him the initial information.

“Sure.”

“Alright. See you tomorrow.”

“Hm.”

After a quick debriefing, we parted ways. He charged a flat rate of 30,000G, regardless of what he dug up. It was a little higher than market rate, but Reggs assured us that he would be worth it. The rogue waved goodbye and left the building.

Let's go and see what Gammod has for us.

We were already at the Adventurer's Guild anyway, so we might as well visit the Guildmaster.

“Hm.”

We showed our guild card to the receptionist and asked to meet him. She processed us immediately. She had overheard our earlier conversation with Reggs. Fran's moniker was well known throughout the Adventurer's Guild now, and the receptionist's former politeness was amplified. After a moment, someone showed up to lead us to the second floor.

“Been a while, little lady. I heard you had a lot of fun in Ulmutt.”

“Hm.”

Waiting for us in his office was the former A-Rank and Guildmaster of the Bulboa Adventurer's Guild, Dragon Hammer Gammod. We had fought alongside him during the Fiend Riots. Armed with stout stature and an even stouter hammer, the dwarf was powerful enough to knock the giant Linford out of the sky.

“I would've watched you fight if I didn't have to deal with the mess here.”

“Can't be helped.”

“I would've loved to see how you took down Phelms! Those strings of his are more than a neat trick.”

The two former A-Ranks lived in the same city and had probably worked together. With nicknames like Dragon Hunter and Dragon

Hammer, it was even likely they'd teamed up.

"You know Phelms?"

"Of course. Phelms is my old partner, you know."

Gammod and Phelms really used to be in a party together? The A-Rank party Dragon Killers was quite legendary. Bragging about your party was cringe-inducing, but when you were an A-Rank it all sounded quite cool.

"So, what brings you here today? I doubt you just missed my face."

Gammod was fast on the uptake. Fran asked about Garrus.

"So you're looking for him..."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Sorry, but I don't have a clue." Gammod shook his head. "He did maintenance on my weapon ten days ago, so I know he was still in Bulbola then." But Gammod hadn't kept in touch with the blacksmith afterward. "He mentioned something about going to Ulmutt...but he didn't say when he was leaving."

"I see."

Another dead end. With Gammod at a loss, we decided to go to the Blacksmiths' Guild. Just as Fran got out of her seat, the Guildmaster called out to her.

"By the way, do you have something against mercenaries?"

"Hm?"

"I heard some weird rumors."

"Elaborate."

"About how the Black Lightning Princess hates mercenaries with a vengeance and goes out of her way to wipe them out. How ruthless she is about it depends on who you ask. Some say she fires a barrage of spells as soon as she spots one. Stuff like that."

That's what people were saying?

"There's some mercenary bands in town and they're all terrified. They asked me to make sure."

"I don't hate mercenaries in particular."

“Oh, you don’t?”

“I beat up everyone who makes an enemy of me.”

“I see...”

“Hm.”

Fran did have a track record of wailing on mercenaries. Now that I thought about it, the first adventurer who picked a fight with her was a former mercenary. And then there was Blue Pride, the Blue Cat mercenary crew we ran into in Ulmutt. The Beast King wiped them out, but people who didn’t know the details might have attributed it to Fran.

Given such rumors, Dimmel Squad could be forgiven for being scared of her. The mercenaries we met on the way back to Bulbola knew they were up against an adventurer who could destroy them with ease, and worse, an adventurer who reportedly had some kind of personal grudge against them.

“I’ll tell them,” said Gammod.

“Please do.”

“Also, I have a job for you, if you’re up to it.”

“A job?”

“Yeah. You’ve clashed swords with some A-Ranks. I was wondering if you’d be interested in showing off your strength.”

Were there dangerous monsters that needed exterminating? Whatever it was, I hoped it wouldn’t take long.

“We have some promising adventurers here, but I want to show them what real strength is like. I was hoping you’d be interested in sparring.”

“Can’t you do it yourself?”

We didn’t know if we could beat Gammod. He said he would’ve had a hard time beating Phelms, but Phelms was a chef now, while Gammod was still Guildmaster. I could still hear the thwack of his hammer ramming into Linford’s body. If all he wanted was a show of strength, that would be enough. But Gammod shook his head.

“I’ve known them since they were kids. They’re too used to me and Forlund beating them. Tomorrow morning’s all I need. You in?”

Teacher, can I take this one? Fran sounded motivated. She had to

be interested in Gammod's star pupils.

I think it's a good deal. Gammod will owe us after this, too.

"Hm. I'm in."

"Nice! I'll let the kids know. They're all older than you, but still! Bust their noses open for me, eh? Ga ha ha!"

"Hm."

Fran worked out the details with the Guildmaster before leaving the Adventurer's Guild.

Next stop, the Blacksmiths' Guild.

"Hm."

We wasted no time asking where it was. The Blacksmiths' Guild was located close to the harbor to allow for transport of ores and minerals, but we had to make one more stop before heading there.

We need to buy liquor.

"Where?"

A liquor store, I guess. We could check out some pubs and ask if they're selling by the bottle, too.

Gammod had advised us to bring a gift if we were visiting. The Blacksmiths' Guildmaster and higher-ups were mostly dwarves, and as such appreciated alcohol. They acted much like the dwarves I'd read about in the fantasy fiction back home. Hopefully we could bring them a drink that would make their beards stand on end.

I just hope there's a good liquor store on the way.

"When are we stopping by Phelms'?"

Oh yeah. The Dragonhead is right around here, isn't it?

Fran reminded me of the former A-Rank turned master chef. We weren't too far from his restaurant. Maybe they had some decent alcohol.

Let's stop by. The man already gave us a free meal ticket, anyway.

"Hm!"

It was a good time for lunch, so we headed off to Dragonhead.

"Can't wait."

"Woof woof!"

Fran skipped all the way there, knowing the deliciousness that was in store for her. Jet was going to be a problem, though. Restaurants didn't usually allow normal pets in, let alone wolves. Phelms was acquainted with both Fran and Jet, but he would be hard-pressed to make an exception. I explained the circumstances to Fran and she reached her cruel conclusion.

"Stay in the shadows, Jet."

"Arf...?"

No. The shop's small enough as it is. I don't think they allow ordinary pets in, anyway.

"Woof..." Jet pleaded to Fran with tearful puppy-dog eyes, but his cuteness wasn't going to work on her today.

"No."

"Arf..."

Utterly dejected, Jet took his time sinking into the shadows. I would have to cheer him up later with some equally good food. With Jet's tiny rebellion out of the way, Fran set her eyes on the Dragonhead. She never forgot the location of good food and knew exactly which paths to take.

Good to see it's the same. Not too loud, but not too shabby.

The shop was tucked away in a nice corner and had all the charm of a trendy restaurant. I would've had a hard time walking through its doors back on Earth. It reminded me of a classy French restaurant, tucked away in an obscure corner of a residential area.

A small name plaque was posted above the doorway. A window on the side allowed passersby to peer in. The place hadn't changed a bit. Fran opened the door and went inside.

"Welcome! Table for one?"

"Hm."

"Right this way."

"Thanks."

"Unfortunately, our head chef is away at the moment, so we won't be able to serve you the entire array of our menu. Will that be alright?"

The waitress handed us a short menu. Normally there were over

thirty dishes for sale, but right now there were only five.

I guess Phelms isn't back yet.

Fran had fought the Dragonhead head chef only a few days ago in Ulmutt, and he probably didn't travel as quickly as we did. In the meantime, cooking duties were assigned to his sous chef, but he was still in training and couldn't prepare as many dishes as his master. The house specialty, Dragonbone Soup, was still available—Phelms had made sure to stock up before his departure.

"I'll have everything on the menu."

"Umm, all of it?"

"Hm. All of it."

"Our portion sizes are quite generous. Are you sure?"

"Yeah, no problem. I've been here before."

"A-alright then."

"And here."

Fran took out Phelms's meal ticket and handed it to the waitress. Her eyes grew wider than plates and her hands trembled. She was making a really big deal out of a single meal ticket.

"Th-this is..."

"Phelms gave it to me."

"I knew it! This is the legendary Immensely Invaluable Person Meal Ticket! Otherwise known as the Super VIP Ticket!"

Wow. That good? It looked like an ordinary coupon to me.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no! The owner's away and that idiot's the one doing the cooking! He's not even a fraction as good as our owner! If his cooking upsets the Super VIP, Phelms will have our heads!"

The waitress didn't pull her punches talking about her colleague. I assumed "that idiot" was Phelms's pupil. I felt sorry for the poor guy.

"You don't have to do anything special."

"No! We can't just serve something ordinary to someone with the Immensely Invaluable Person Meal Ticket...!"

Actually, this was a good opportunity. I felt slightly guilty about exploiting our superior position, but maybe we could use her panic to

our advantage.

Fran, ask her if we can have some liquor.

“I’ll have some of your liquor, then. A bottle of your best should do it.”

“Yes, ma’am! Alcohol, right? I’ll be right back!”

The waitress left without taking our order. It felt like an actual offense. Whether we told Phelms about it would depend on the quality of alcohol.

Five minutes later, the woman returned, clearly out of breath. She brought a bottle of wine, encased in a beautiful wooden casket. The bottom of the bottle was wrapped in red velvet and screamed high quality.

“This is the greatest wine produced by the best vineyard in all of Granzell! This bottle has been preserved with magic for a hundred and twenty years!”

Okay, I don’t think we’re worthy of this wine!

“Unfortunately, we don’t sell this bottle in our restaurant...”

“Then how’d you get it?”

“The bottle came straight from the owner’s private wine collection! He is quite the connoisseur, you see!”

Whoa, no, stop. Phelms might actually have her head for that. I didn’t want us to be the cause of his bad mood. We refused her mad offer and asked her to bring the best wine they actually sold.

A bottle was worth 10,000G. It didn’t sound too bad. It was expensive enough to be high quality, and I didn’t think Phelms would stock his shop with bad wine. It was the perfect gift. Five bottles would do nicely.

“Are you sure this is enough? The owner has better wine in his cellar.”

“It’s fine. Anyway, I’m hungry.”

“Aaaah! O-of course! I-I’m so sorry! We’ll get your food ready right away!”

The waitress finally remembered to take Fran’s order. She rushed away to the kitchen, head still bowed in apology.

Is that girl going to be alright?

“Hm.”

You know it was bad when even Fran was worried. At least we got some nice bottles of wine out of it. After cleaning all five of her plates, Fran washed it down with a cup of tea.

How was it?

It was nice.

Her appetite was proof that the food was delicious. Still, she looked oddly satisfied. The chef came out of the kitchen. He was a stern-looking man with a shaved head. His angular face made him look much older than he was. This was “that idiot.” He came out of the kitchen to greet the owner of the VIP coupon.

“H-how do you find your meal?”

Despite his terrifying appearance, he was very modest.

“Phelms’s is better.”

“I-I see...”

Fran just came out and said it. She was never one to flatter. Actually, I didn’t think she knew how. I just hoped the chef wouldn’t feel too bad about it.

“How can I make it better?”

The man was more resilient than I thought. He asked Fran for advice without a hint of regret. He took out a notepad. He wasn’t an idiot in the kitchen, but he was probably an idiot about cooking. We’d do him a favor by giving straightforward advice.

Since I couldn’t eat any of it, Fran would be the one doing the critique. She’d been a slave for a long time, and most food was delicious to her. That said, she could still distinguish tasty from tasteless. An ordinary person might have five grades of deliciousness: Delicious, Tasty, Okay, Not Bad, and Bad. Fran also had five grades, but hers were more like: Super Delicious, Delicious, Okay, Not Bad, and Inedible. She calmly told the young chef which parts of his cooking needed work. Thanks to our maxed-out Cooking Skill, the advice was valid.

Twilight had fallen by the time we left the restaurant. The young chef was gathering himself off the floor after Fran’s harsh critique. He took it like a man to begin with, but soon collapsed under the weight of

her words. I wished him all the best.

“What is it, Teacher?”

Nothing. We need to get going to the Blacksmiths’ Guild.

“Hm!”

Having broken the man’s spirit, Fran went on her way. Once we’d entered the blacksmith’s district, we immediately spotted the guild. It was a large building with a chimney. Men as hard as hammers walked through its doors. This was the place alright.

That one.

The emblem in the building’s plaque was two crossed hammers. We pushed open the heavy doors to find quite the intimidating atmosphere. The hall was dimly lit and the ceilings were low, making the guildhouse look more like a cavern. I could hear the clang of metal and the angry shouts of men. This was no place for the fairer sex.

“Hrmph. What do you want?” the receptionist grunted, lacking all the manners of the Adventurer’s Guild. The macho dwarf glared at Fran to make her go away.

“I’m looking for someone.”

“That’s not what we do here. Try the Adventurer’s Guild.”

Oh, but he sounded so cool. It reminded me of a bartender saying, *We don’t serve that here*, when the protagonist asks for milk. An ordinary woman would leave. Then again, he was probably equal in his treatment of outsiders. Men and women alike would flee for their lives. But then, Fran wasn’t your run-of-the-mill civilian.

“I’m looking for a blacksmith named Garrus.”

“Never heard of him. We done here?”

“No.”

This looked just like my old hardboiled detective adventures... I was tearing up. But the conversation was getting nowhere, so we brought out our present to grease the wheels.

“Bring me someone who has heard of him. I’ll make it worth their while.”

“Will you now?” The dwarf perked up as soon as he saw the bottle of wine. “What do we have here...?!”

The receptionist reached for the bottle, and Fran pulled it away. The dwarf glared at her, but she kept her cool and stowed it back into Pocket Dimension.

“Get me someone who knows Garrus. Someone who knows where he is.”

“Hang on...” The receptionist retreated to the back room for a good ten minutes. “Come with me.”

“Hm.”

He led us into a room in the basement. The door was large, but the room still felt a bit cramped—as though the door was too large on purpose. The only sources of light were in its four corners. Bottles of alcohol were strewn about the table, making it look more like a pub than an office.

“Here she is, boss.”

“Thanks.”

This must be the Guildmaster’s office. The dwarves must’ve really loved their hard drink to give us such high treatment—Fran hadn’t even introduced herself yet. Then again, maybe it was because we mentioned Garrus. Fran took out a bottle of wine and passed it to the receptionist.

“Hey now. You sure about this?”

“I have more.”

“Alright then. Don’t mind if I do.” The dwarf’s glare turned into a megawatt smile. This one definitely liked his drink.

“You brought wine?” asked the Guildmaster.

“Hm. It’s a gift. Take it.”

“Well then. Looks like I have another reason to treat the Black Lightning Princess well. I was afraid you’d blow up our guildhouse.”

He knew about Fran, even if that knowledge was limited to her appearance and her nickname. I could think of several reasons why people recognized her. Adventurers, and by extension anyone who worked with them, would know that the Black Lightning Princess had entered Bulbola. The blacksmiths outfitted all races and knew the abilities of each. One look at Fran told them that she was an abnormally strong Black Cat. Even the most businesslike blacksmith could sense her strength.

When Fran told the Guildmaster we were looking for Garrus, he frowned. That was the reaction we were looking for. I got the feeling he knew where to find him.

“Are you Fran, by any chance?”

“You don’t know?”

“I only know you as the Black Lightning Princess.”

“Yeah. My name is Fran.”

“And you were called the Swordceress before?”

“Hm.”

Why the need for verification?

“I see... Unfortunately, I don’t know where Garrus is.”

Teacher?

Truth. The Guildmaster genuinely didn’t know.

“I do have some information about him, but I must ask you not to tell a soul. Top secret stuff.”

“Hm. My lips are sealed.”

“I hope they are. Garrus is on a confidential task, commissioned by nobility.”

“Elaborate.”

“I don’t know the details...but suffice it to say it isn’t possible to turn down a powerful family. He had to accept, albeit begrudgingly.”

Garrus couldn’t escape the influence of nobility, either.

“They kidnapped him?”

“Nothing that drastic, although they were quite forcible. It’s still listed as an official task.”

“I see.”

No lies here, either. No wonder we couldn’t contact him. He was on a confidential quest.

“He gave me a letter and told me to deliver it to the Swordceress Fran. He said to see you as soon as you came here...”

But the Swordceress was no more. Then again, Garrus couldn’t have foreseen that. The Black Lightning Princess bore no trace of her

old nickname, making it more difficult for the Guildmaster to track her down.

“Here you go. Still sealed.”

“Hm.”

The Guildmaster hadn’t gone snooping.

“Don’t read it here. The guild would be in trouble if details to a confidential quest got leaked. I’ve poked my nose in enough times already.”

It sounded like holding onto the letter was enough to land the Guildmaster in hot water. He still got it to Fran in one piece, though.

“Tell him I said hello when you see him.”

“Sure.”

Fran took the letter and left the bottles of wine behind. We didn’t know what was in Garrus’s letter, so we would need some privacy.

It’s getting late. Let’s get a room at an inn.

“Hm.”

We decided to stay at the inn closest to the Adventurer’s Guild. The establishment allowed familiars, and we needed to be at the guild first thing in the morning.

“Nice room.”

“Bark bark!”

Of course it’s nice.

The room came with a bathtub and it cost 15,000G a night. Fran didn’t mind getting a cheaper room, but the Black Lightning Princess couldn’t afford to be taken lightly. I was still quite the show-off, even as a sword. Still, the fact remained that her nickname was making the rounds, and it’d be better for everyone involved if they didn’t underestimate Fran.

Let’s read the letter.

“Hm.”

Whoa, don’t just rip it open like that! Easy now.

Fran tore open the envelope and a piece of paper fell out of it, covered in Garrus’s neat handwriting.

First, he told us that some powerful nobles had made a personal request that he couldn't refuse. He wouldn't be able to contact us until the quest was over, and he couldn't tell us his exact location. However, he was certain that he would be in the capital by the time we read this. He asked us to come visit the equipment auctions to see if anything caught our eye. Also, he was making us a new scabbard and wanted to give it to us soon. He would eagerly await our arrival.

And that was it. Fortunately, we were bound for the capital regardless. We wanted to check out the crystal auctions.

Guess he's not in Bulbola anymore.

"Hm. One more reason to go to the capital."

Pretty much.

Meeting Garrus was our main reason for stopping here, but I guess he would have to wait.

Chapter 2: Broken Noses

WE LEFT FOR THE Adventurer's Guild the next morning, eager to see what Reggs had managed to dig up. We knew where Garrus was now, but maybe the informant had found something else—like the family who hired him, or the circumstances. If they had forced Garrus into working for them, then we weren't about to hunt them down, but we would definitely be more cautious.

"Sorry for the wait."

"No problem. I just got here."

While their exchange was like lovers going on a date, the romance was ruined by Reggs' middle-aged grin.

"I've got some information for you. I've reserved a room for us upstairs. Let's go."

"Alright."

Reggs didn't want any eavesdroppers? This was promising. He led us to one of the guild's private rooms.

"Silence."

"Excellent spell. No wonder they call you the Black Lightning Princess."

We soundproofed the room with Silence so we could talk without worrying about eavesdroppers.

"So about Garrus... Unfortunately, I don't know his exact location."

"Hm. Can't be helped."

Reggs explained that Garrus was hired by the government and was no longer in the city. Nothing we didn't know already.

"Looks like you knew that already. How about this then? Garrus has been employed by the kingdom, right?"

"Hm."

"Well, whoever hired him bore the crest of the Marquis Aschtner.

I don't know if the marquis was acting under orders of the royal family or not...but I'm willing to bet he hired Garrus for his own reasons."

The marquis would've acted secretly, but the information seemed to be accurate. The crest was the same as the Aschtner's villa here in Bulbola. Reggs had seen them frequent the villa, as well. The vassal had done himself a disservice by acting in secret. Bulbolans were nervous about suspicious people from the capital ever since the Linford Fiend outbreak.

"Aschtner? I've heard that name before."

Marquis Aschtner is Seldio's father.

He's the noble tracking down Godswords?

Yeah.

Seldio was a nobleman adventurer who attacked Fran in the dungeons of Ulmutt—trying to steal me away from her. We didn't have a friendly impression of his dad, either. This was the man who drugged his own son and controlled him like a puppet. Also, secretly collecting superweapons wasn't a hobby for an upright noble. And now he'd got his hands on Garrus...

"I didn't see it for myself, but I hear a cart left the Aschtner house the day Garrus disappeared."

"You think he was in it?"

"It's a high possibility."

"Is Garrus okay?"

"He should be. I think your blacksmith is being treated well. Can't expect him to work after a torture session."

Reggs had a point. Upsetting Garrus would affect the quality of his work. He couldn't use his skills while under the effects of mind control, either. Aschtner needed to keep Garrus in one piece. Of course, that didn't exempt Garrus from being pressured in other ways.

"Besides, Garrus is Blacksmith Royal of Granzell—a title bestowed on him by the king himself. Harming him could be counted as treason."

"What if they silenced him?"

"Won't work. If a man like Garrus fell off the radar for too long, the kingdom would look for him. Even if they hid him perfectly, they wouldn't escape the kingdom's reach. No one would be that stupid."

I dunno, Reggs. We'd seen nobles do stupider things than that.

"In any case, Garrus is the closest thing we have to a Godsmith. His skill is literally priceless. I don't think the Aschtners would do anything stupid."

Good point. We were expecting the worst, but Garrus's letter didn't sound like he was dragged away kicking and screaming. He even told us to meet him at the auctions, so I was sure we could contact him once we got to the capital. Regardless, since we didn't know where he was, we couldn't do anything for him.

"I have some extra tidbits about the Aschtners that might interest you."

"Shoot."

"It looks like their subordinates were up to something. Something big enough for the kingdom to launch an investigation into their villa here."

They must've gotten a whiff of the Seldio incident. Perhaps they were compelled by all the complaints from the Adventurer's Guild. Did hiring Garrus have something to do with that? We didn't have enough information.

"Also, their knights were sent on an expedition to the Demon Wolf's Garden. Most of them were wiped out in the Withering Forest, and only a few returned."

"The Demon Wolf's Garden? Why would they go there?"

"I couldn't get the details. They did hire some adventurers to continue the expedition, though."

How persistent of them. The Garden was a Haunt with B-Rank monsters. The Aschtners would have a hard time finding adventurers to risk it.

"Nothing came of it. The only ones who would take the offer were low rank."

Figured. Marquis Aschtner wanted to keep his expedition a secret and posted the quest anonymously. No adventurer in his right mind would take on something so risky.

"That's all I have for you. Sorry I couldn't get anything better."

"No problem. It was still useful."

We'd confirmed that Garrus was safe and that Aschtner was involved. Those were vital bits of information. We paid Reggs the agreed fee and went on our way.

We still don't know where Garrus is.

"Hm..."

Well, he told us to meet him at the auction. All we can do now is wait.

"Alright."

Fran knew that it was out of her hands. It didn't take long for her to organize her feelings.

Garrus can handle himself better than we can. He'll be fine.

"Hm."

Anyway, we need to see Gammod. We're right on time, too.

"Hm."

A sparring match with young adventurers...

"I'm burning with determination."

No! There will be no burnings of anyone today!

"Hm?"

I was a lot more worried about whether Fran knew to hold back! It was nice to know she was motivated, but if she fought too hard, she might permanently injure the cadets. As talented as Gammod made them sound, they definitely wouldn't be able to keep up with Fran. I was pretty sure the Guildmaster knew that. Or had he set her up with adventurers who were strong enough to make her sweat? No, he was most likely forcing his students to walk the valley of humiliation. I just hoped they could survive the trek. Well, we'd figure that out when we saw them.

We left the meeting room and headed to the first floor. The Guildmaster would probably allow us to drop into his office, but a quest was a quest. We had to go through the proper channels.

"Is Gammod here yet?" Fran's tone remained improper, of course.

"Good morning, Fran. Yes, right this way."

The receptionist led us to a small room in the back of the guild. When we went inside, we saw it was an armory. Weapons and armor decorated the cramped walls. Some were just left on the floor.

Gammod was waiting for Fran. He was fully geared up, radiating intense mana. I recognized his armor from the Linford fight. This was what he wore in a fight to the death. Hang on, was he going out to hunt dragons? I thought he just wanted us to spar with his students?

“You’re here!”

“Hm. What’s with the armor? Am I sparring with you, too?” Fran’s voice dripped with excitement. She desperately wanted to see what Gammod was capable of.

Unfortunately, the dwarf shook his head. “No, I’m the referee. I just thought I should gear up in case you pull off a big spell. Safety first, you know.”

“Oh.” Fran sighed, clearly disappointed, but she was still determined to give everything she had.

“Harumph.”

You can take it easy, Fran.

“Hm. I’ll do my best.”

Fran clenched her fists. I prayed for the safety of her training partners.

“Are you ready?”

“Ready enough to kill.”

No killing!

“Well then, let’s get going. The kids are in the training area round back.”

The training area was quite sizable: thirty meters from corner to corner. The walls were thick to prevent any roughhousing from spilling out of the training room. There were more adventurers waiting for us than I expected.

“Look alive, you punks!”

“S’up.”

“Good morning, sir!”

“Hey.”

“Wooo!”

I was expecting two or three, not nine. Their personalities were

varied enough, from delinquent to annoyingly passionate to straitlaced. I Identified them and found that they were all quite strong. Two stood out from the rest: a Level 27 Illusion Blade and a Level 26 Flame Mage. Both had D-Rank abilities.

The D-Ranks aside, the average level was still about 22—strong E-Ranks, at least. The lowest was a Level 20 Scout. I could see why Gammod took an interest in them. Considering how young they were, they were actually quite powerful.

“We’re going to do some sparring today.”

The adventurers groaned at Gammod’s announcement.

“Again?”

“Can we fight Forlund, at least?”

“You don’t pull your punches like, ever.”

Despite the youths’ complaints, there was no malice in them.

“Shut it, you brats!” Gammod shouted, immediately silencing them. “Introduce yourself.”

“Hm. Fran.” Fran stepped forward, drawing their gaze.

They turned to one of their members. Why were they all looking at this one man? A quick Identify revealed that the Shielder, named Red, possessed Identify 7. They couldn’t tell how strong Fran was, but he could.

Still, Identify wouldn’t help him with our Fake Identity in play. We had set our abilities to look like a greenhorn. Identify wasn’t everything—and this was coming from someone who used it frequently. Fake Identity aside, there were things that it couldn’t reveal—namely experience and mentality. Someday, their overreliance on Identify would get them in trouble. Fortunately, today might just be that day. Gammod charged his cadets with the cruel task of figuring out Fran’s real strength.

Red sighed and shrugged to his friends, signaling that Fran was no big deal. The rest of the adventurers immediately relaxed. They thought the Guildmaster was only showing Fran the training room and wanted to introduce her.

“All of you are going to spar with Fran today.”

“Are...you sure?” one of the adventurers asked.

“Yeah. Fran, don’t go easy on ’em. Beat ’em up to your heart’s content.”

“Hm.” Fran nodded.

The adventurers smirked, all except Mr. Straitlaced. They thought Gammod was giving them free rein. That she’d acted out of line and needed a good beating. “You got it, boss.”

“Good.” Gammod only made matters worse. He purposely let the misunderstanding hang.

Never mind bones, their egos were going to be shattered once they saw what Fran was capable of. I could sympathize with the young and talented adventurers. Better for them to break their noses in training than to suffer broken bones on the battlefield.

“Dufaux, you’re up.” Gammod pointed at Fran’s first victim.

“Who, me?”

“Did I stutter?”

“No...”

Fran stole a glance at Gammod, who responded with a smile and a wink—giving her the assurance that she could whale on his pupil all she wanted.

Don’t go overboard.

Hm. I’ll make sure he can still come back with a Greater Heal.

That’s going overboard! At least make it a Mid Heal!

Fran readied me and walked to the middle of the arena, unable to conceal her enthusiasm.

Dufaux, the young Illusion Blade, took his time entering the arena, blissfully unaware of the pain that was to come. He looked disappointed at having to fight Fran, since he was convinced that Gammod would bring him an actual challenge. The dwarf stood between them as referee.

“You’re all going to fight Fran at least twice.”

“What? I don’t think she’s going to last.”

“All depends on how you fight.”

Dufaux shrugged, unsure of how to respond to that.

“I have healers ready, don’t worry. Come on, get started.”

“Yes, yes. I swear you only call me for these occasions.” An ordinary looking middle-aged woman came into the training hall at Gammod’s behest. She looked so plain that her name could have been Villager A, for all I knew. She looked very out of place.

A quick Identify ratified my view of her. She was strong—stronger than the young adventurers assembled here. Healing Magic 3 immediately caught my eye. She was a high enough level to use Greater Heal.

“This is Beth. Former B-Rank, now a happily wedded housewife.”

“I still get requests from time to time.”

“Come on, we pay you well enough.”

“That doesn’t make me your private healer! Well, you’re a great help to our finances, at least. My husband is so bad at saving money. Ha ha ha!”

She looked like an ordinary woman, but that might be testament to her expertise. I expected the adventurers to underestimate her, but they took her seriously enough. Even *they* knew the top healers. They were relieved, although their contempt for Fran remained. They just took it as a sign that they were allowed to go all out.

Fran had the exact same thought. She grinned.

“Bow.” Gammod signaled the fighters to get ready.

“Name’s Dufaux.”

“Fran.”

“Begin!”

On his mark, Gammod started the match. However, the two combatants were at a standstill. Each waited for the other to make the first move, albeit for completely different reasons.

Fran had a habit of waiting for her opponent to act first. It gave her a chance to knock Dufaux out in one blow, since he’d already underestimated her abilities. On the other hand, Dufaux thought it was good manners to let a weak opponent go first. He trusted his friend’s Identify and expected Fran to be another weak Black Cat. Considering his level, he should have judged Fran’s abilities regardless of Identify...

In any case, he wasn’t going to make the first move. He would be

a gentleman and give Fran the first attack. Expectation was a terrifying thing.

“What’s wrong? Aren’t you going to attack?”

“Can I?” Fran asked.

Her question was directed at Gammod, but Dufaux thought she was asking him.

“It’s good manners to let the weaker combatant have the first move.”

Those were fighting words. The hilarious irony almost made me laugh.

“Hm?”

Nothing.

“What are you mumbling about?” he said. “Come on, I have to get back to work. I don’t got all day to play with you.”

“But you said the weaker combatant has the first move.”

“So?”

“So you should go first.”

That would get his attention. Fran was only stating the truth, but that statement dealt huge damage to Dufaux’s ego.

“Don’t go acting smart on me, kid.”

“How am I acting smart?”

“I mean don’t get in over your head! You think I’m weaker?! Huh?!”

“Yeah. Anyone can see that.”

“You little...!”

Wow, this guy had a short temper. I thought it was childish to believe his friend’s Identify without a second thought, but this was getting hard to watch. But then, despite his abilities, he was only twenty-three and still ignorant of the ways of the world. He was inexperienced and liable to get in trouble outside of battle, despite all of his training. This blind spot might be why Gammod asked Fran to spar with them.

“Dude, just hurry up and make the first attack.”

“Yeah, you’re getting into an argument with a kid. Really?”

“Get this farce over with so we can leave.”

Dufaux’s companions were egging him on now. They didn’t think he was about to lose, either.

“Shut up! You want me to make the first move to a newbie?!” The jeering only made him more stubborn.

Can’t be helped. I guess you’ll have to hit him first.

Hm. Sure.

Fran readied me. “I’m going to attack you now. Block it.”

“What are you telling me that for?”

“Here goes.”

“Huh—?”

Dufaux barely had a chance to react. Sharp pain rushed through his right leg as he lost his balance and fell to the floor. Fran was in front of him before he even knew what was going on.

“Gaaaargh!” He screamed, holding his freshly chopped stump.

Was that too much?

I thought Fran wanted to let Dufaux show off his abilities by purposely giving him an easy first strike.

Now the others won’t think twice about attacking me.

I see.

Dufaux was a howling witness of what would happen if you didn’t take Fran seriously.

I think you got the point across.

“Next. Rachid.” Gammod’s voice boomed through the training hall.

“What? Me?”

“Ready up!”

“S-sir!”

The next victim frantically stumbled into the arena. He was the lancer who had egged Dufaux on.

“I’m Fran.”

“R-Rachid. Wait, no, I’m not ready!”

Gammod ignored Rachid’s pleas. “Begin!”

“Hm.”

“Gyaaaa!”

The fight was over as soon as it started. Fran lopped off the tip of Rachid’s spear, along with his right arm. The rest of the crew finally grasped that Fran was no ordinary girl. Their anxiety was palpable.

“Next. Naria.” Gammod pointed to the archer who had teased Dufaux earlier.

“Uhhhhh.” She tossed a glance at Rachid, who was receiving treatment for his wounds.

“My goodness, it’s such a clean cut!”

“It hurts...”

“Come on, man up and stop struggling!”

“Ow! Don’t hit me...!”

“I did nothing of the sort.”

The healer was saying things like, “You want me to kiss it better?” while administering Greater Heals. The blood pouring out of Rachid’s arm should’ve made for a gruesome scene, but the old healer was smiling and unfazed. She wasn’t a former B-Rank for nothing.

Naria glanced at Red, begging for help. The Shielder noticed her gaze and responded to it with a frantic shake of the head. He couldn’t make heads or tails of it—Fran’s stats were still as weak as before.

“I’m Fran.”

“Umm...”

“And this is Naria. Begin!”

“Wait, no! Dammit!”

Naria stepped back the instant the match began. After watching her two companions get mauled, she decided to make the best of her panic. She drew her bow, preparing to take aim, but Fran was too close.

“Shit, why is she so fa—gyaaa!”

Naria lost in the same manner as Rachid—by losing her right arm.

Next up was a big man named Miguel. He walked steadily into the

arena and was the first among the crew who looked like he considered Fran a legitimate threat. He tossed a cursory glance at Red, but the Shielder could do little more than shrug.

“I’m Miguel.”

“Hm. Fran.”

“Begin!”

“Haaaa!”

Miguel actually came at us full force. Good on him. Unfortunately, his attack was nothing to write home about. While he knew that Fran was concealing her stats, her appearance was still that of a weak little girl. He brought his greatsword down on her head, intent on crushing her through sheer force.

I guessed we could give him and Red a little bit of a show.

“Hm!”

“What?!” Miguel gasped in shock.

Fran positioned me to block. Their swords clashed, and although Miguel put his entire weight into his strike, Fran didn’t flinch.

“Hmph!”

“Aaaargh!”

Fran braced herself and thrust forward. It lifted the big man—he lost his balance and fell over. Miguel and Red couldn’t believe their eyes. Fran shouldn’t be able to overpower him, let alone with one swing. And yet she did so easily. Of course, that wasn’t the end of the show.

“Stun Bolt.”

“Guaaah!”

“No way!” Red shouted in disbelief as Fran used Thunder Magic—a skill not listed in her stats.

“Ha!”

“Urgh...”

Fran kicked Miguel right in the face, sending his paralyzed body flying several meters.

Red could only croak in disbelief. “Why...?”

“Yes, Red?” Gammod asked innocently. This was the exact development he was looking for.

“S-sir, what’s with this beast girl?!”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s not supposed to be this strong! Identify listed her as being low level and unable to use magic! And what she did to Miguel...!”

Gammod grinned. “You don’t know who she is?”

“No!”

“A Black Cat girl, able to use Thunder Magic and neutralize Dufaux in a second. And you don’t know who she is? None of you?”

“...”

Gammod’s question was answered with silence. I couldn’t believe none of them guessed “Black Lightning Princess” with all the hints he gave them.

The Guildmaster sighed, clearly frustrated. “This is why I’m worried sick about your development.”

“...”

“Your heads are inflated beyond belief. You go hunting without a shred of information and leave everything to blind luck. You rely on Identify so much that you can’t tell when you’re facing a powerful opponent, and you immediately get obliterated as soon as the bell rings.”

Gammod didn’t mince his words. He wanted Fran to break their egos; it was the whole point of these matches.

Gammod introduced Fran to the silent and dejected adventurers. “This is the C-Rank adventurer, Fran. Also known as the Black Lightning Princess. She’s the guild’s top rising star, especially after beating an A-Rank in the Ulmutt fighting tournament.”

The adventurers’ eyes went wide. They might not know who the Black Lightning Princess was, but they knew how hard it was to place in the tournament.

“That’s the tournament you failed to get into, by the way.”

The cadets knew firsthand how difficult it was to pass the qualifiers.

“What?”

“No way!”

“I think I heard rumors about her...”

“I mean, she’s a Black Cat...”

“You could’ve figured out who she was,” Gammod shouted, “if you paid the slightest bit of attention!”

The adventurers slumped in unison. They knew their information game was slacking, and it had caused them great physical pain.

“There are skills that allow people to fake or hide their Identify stats. Keep relying on it, and you’ll walk into an early grave.”

“Yes, sir...”

“Remember that there’s always someone better—”

Gammod gave his cadets an earful and only stopped when Beth the paramedic started yawning.

His lecture was a useful refresher to me. What happened to the cadets could happen to us at any time. The matches reminded me to be more mindful of who we fought and how we fought them. The tournament taught us the terror of a difference in strength. The sparring matches taught us not to forget the basics.

“Phew. Sorry about that, little lady.”

“Hm. You took too long.”

“Yeah. You got the point across, though. Sparring with tougher opponents is how you grow. I hope you can whip ’em into shape.”

“Of course.” Fran grinned.

The adventurers couldn’t sneer at her any more. In fact, they were cowering as if they’d been thrown naked to a pack of wild animals. I felt a little bad, but Gammod announced that the sparring would go on. The adventurers were completely annihilated. Fran beat them all without giving them a chance to show what they were made of. It took less than five minutes.

“Is that all you’ve got? You guys are pathetic...”

“Urgh...”

“I’m sorry, sir...”

The adventurers looked dejected. Gammod's attempt to motivate them with tough words had failed. They knew how weak they were, and they had lost all confidence in themselves. We might have completely shattered their spirits. Fran tossed a glance at the Guildmaster to see if he wanted her to continue. Broken adventurers might grow depressed and might quit adventuring altogether, but Gammod only nodded, unfazed by such trivialities.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. If this is enough to make them quit, that means they're not cut out for it. Better to quit while they're still alive."

Willpower cannot be trained in a mechanical way like the body. Adventuring required a certain type of character, and it certainly wasn't for everyone. Gammod was being kind—letting them leave before they were killed in the line of duty. With their abilities, it was only a matter of time before they started exploring dangerous dungeons and Haunts. By then, it would be too late to make them realize their weakness.

"We'll begin the second round. Dufaux, Naria, Miguel. Step forward."

"Sir..."

"Eek."

"Yeah..."

The adventurers answered, making it apparent they had already given up. Naria was already terrified.

"Three-on-one now. That okay with you?"

"Hm."

The adventurers were definitely not okay with it, but Gammod didn't ask for their opinion.

"Let's see...the little lady won't fight back to begin with. If you manage to land a single hit on her, you win."

You can't just throw in new rules like that! Either way, the restriction only served to motivate Fran. I sometimes forgot that she was still a child, and this was like a game to her. Life also returned to the adventurers' eyes as they saw that they had a fighting chance. With the three of them together, they might be able to hit Fran before she wiped them out.

“Ready? Begin!”

“Raargh!”

Miguel rushed forward to open the match. He swung his greatsword, but the move was so awkward that we could tell it was a feint. Dufaux jumped out of the big man’s cover and did a decent job at concealing his presence. Meanwhile, Naria pelted Fran with arrows, firing them from under Miguel’s arm. They were almost close enough to graze Fran’s face. Not bad for an ambush. Following the archer, Dufaux prepared his attack. All the time they spent together was paying off.

Dufaux’s sword flickered like a mirage thanks to his Illusion Blade—a skill that allowed him to mask his swordsmanship. It was a useful thing to have in close-quarter combat.

However, it would prove worthless against Fran. She could feel his presence and the air. She broke the arrows in midflight with her bare hands and dodged Miguel and Dufaux’s attacks by a hair’s breadth. Then she jumped away from the circle of death and left the three cadets stupefied.

They thought nothing could evade their highly coordinated attack. The three tried to land any kind of strike on Fran, but she dodged with ease. Once Gammod gave her the go-ahead, she kicked them all away, knocking every one of them out cold.

The other adventurers could only watch in stunned silence. If that level of coordination wasn’t enough to beat her, they couldn’t imagine how they would land a hit. Even so, the sparring session continued. The second group ended the same way as the first, and we moved on to the third. It was a party of three: Wander, a Flame Mage who was as powerful as Dufaux; Red, the Shielder; and Riddick, the straight-man Lancer. Red was terrified, while Riddick looked the most prepared. Wander looked confident enough—although he was helpless against Fran in a one-on-one duel, he had a fighting chance now that he was in a group. His attitude was a far cry from his initial surrender in the solo match.

He had a good reason to be confident. Get good enough with magic and you learn how to manipulate the path of a spell, making it very difficult to dodge. Red and Riddick drew Fran into position and the Flame Mage cast his spell.

“Flare Blast!”

He was serious, too. The spell was powerful enough to gravely injure a C-Rank and leave a mark that even Greater Heal couldn't mend. And it wasn't like Wander lost control. He smirked, knowing that sweet revenge was at hand. He knew exactly how much mana he had used. The whole thing made me want to crush him. We needed to leave something behind for Gammod, I guess, but Wander's ego was about to be obliterated.

"Flare Blast."

Fran fired the exact same spell back at Wander. They exploded and canceled each other out.

"That can't be! Flare Blast!"

"Flare Blast."

"No...Fire Javelin!"

"Fire Javelin."

"No no no no no!"

Canceling a spell like that wasn't as simple as it looked. You had to cast the exact same spell as your opponent and control it so that they met. That meant Speedcasting your opponent's spell the second you knew what it was. It was a complex move and only possible if you knew the type and intensity of the opponent's spell. Then again, maybe we only pulled it off because we were up against Wander. He didn't conceal his mana output and took a long time casting his spells. Any skilled magician could have seen through his attacks. Fran wasn't even that good at magic. This was the hidden cost of always casting spells in your allies' shadows—Wander was only focused on magic and neglected his other skills.

When he realized this, he lost the will to fight and fell to his knees. In the end, Fran responded by sending him flying through the air with a single kick. We thought the sparring session was over, but Gammod had other ideas.

"What if all nine of them come at you at once?"

"Hm? Sure, I don't mind."

I swear Gammod was a Spartan drill sergeant, intent on breaking his cadets' spirits. Fran had no reason to refuse, seeing as she had barely broken a sweat. The final match began. The rules were the same as before: Fran wouldn't attack until Gammod's signal, and if the

adventurers managed to land a hit on her before that, victory was theirs.

The whole thing was a wash, of course. The cadets didn't manage to land a hit, even after chasing her for ten minutes. The initial barrage soon faded into half-hearted swings as it dawned on them they were not going to win. It was kind of sad.

Fran wiped out the entire team by putting a tiny bit of effort into her attack. Gammod was caught in her fire spell, but he looked right at home. It wasn't that powerful, really. The cadets should be strong enough to stand their ground, but they did nothing but scream. They needed more mental toughness.

Gammod examined his unconscious pupils and thanked Fran. "That was a good sparring session. Thanks for coming."

"Hm."

"I just hope this motivates them to become stronger."

Gammod sighed. His smile disappeared when he remembered how pathetic the adventurers had been. "Gods, you won't believe how hard they wanted to explore the depths of a Haunt."

"You mean the Crystal Cage?"

"That's the one. You've been there?"

"Only halfway."

"See, even you only made it halfway."

The last time we went to the Crystal Cage was to collect some meat for the cooking contest. That was the first time we saw Forlund. It was quite a shock seeing him take down a B-Threat Thunderbird with little to no difficulty.

"So they wanted to explore the depths?"

"Yeah. Anyone's free to explore the midpoint of the Cage, but entrance to some of the areas is restricted. Not that we have guards posted there at all times, of course. It's up to each individual adventurer to know their limitations. Although folks who go over their limits have a nasty habit of dying."

Monsters of various threat levels spawned in the Crystal Cage. Adventurers did well to avoid areas that were far above their rank, but the whole thing basically ran on an honor system.

“The higher the Threat Level, the more dangerous the area. But with more danger comes greater rewards. A lot of adventurers can’t resist.”

By nature, adventurers were a reckless lot. They took on great risks in the name of great fortune and never once thought about the bad things that might befall them in the process. They might be able to defeat a powerful monster. They might be able to harvest rare herbs and materials. They might get lucky and avoid encountering anything too powerful. To them, bad luck was something that happened to other people. Adventurers readily bit off more than they could chew with that kind of mindset. Apparently, it was the same in Bulbola.

“They’ve managed to clear the midpoint several times in the past.”

Given the cadets’ abilities, that was certainly possible.

“They’ve been pretty lucky so far. They’ve never run into tough monsters... That’s why they’ve been pestering me for permission to travel the depths. That’s the only place that has a barrier.”

“I see.”

“They’re after some precious ore that can only be mined in the depths. Probably to craft gear.”

“So they don’t plan on fighting?”

“Nope. If they’re confident with anything, it’s their ability to run away.”

At least the cadets weren’t stupid enough to think they could beat a B-Threat monster. But I remembered that Thunderbird being pretty fast. I didn’t think we could’ve made it out without our teleportation spells. And the Thunderbird couldn’t be the only deadly creature in the area. Gammod arranged this sparring session to talk the cadets out of anything stupid.

“They can’t run from a Thunderbird.”

“Not to mention a flock of Storm Eagles.”

“They can’t run from a Darkness Wolf like Jet, either,” said Fran.

“Oh right, you have one of those as a familiar. How’s he doing?”

“Sleeping in the shadows.”

Jet had been asleep since early morning, showing no interest in the sparring match as he had no part in it.

“You know...I have an idea.”

Some time passed. The cadets regained their consciousness and stood in line.

“Well? Have you realized how weak you are?”

The adventurers looked at the floor, but I could still sense some discontent from them. They felt it wasn’t fair to put them up against a prodigy like Fran, and that it wasn’t their fault they lost. Gammod wanted to see if they had given up on exploring the depths, but they clearly hadn’t.

“Alright, moving on to the next round.”

“Whaaaaat?”

“Are we still doing this...?”

“Please, no more.”

“Shut up and listen! This final round’s going to be a little different. Little lady, if you please.”

“Hm. Come out, Jet.”

“Woof!”

The black wolf rose from the shadows at Fran’s behest. The mere sight of him was terrifying, and he had the decency to come out in his giant form to boot. The adventurers gulped.

“This is Jet, Fran’s familiar. He’s a C-Threat Darkness Wolf. The kind that could just show up in the midpoint of Crystal Cage.”

This was a big lie. A Darkness Wolf was a C-Threat, but Jet was a unique specimen and had grown far stronger thanks to fighting alongside us. If anything, he was closer to a B-Threat now—certainly not a monster that would spawn in the midpoint of Crystal Cage. But the adventurers didn’t know that, of course. Red checked Jet’s species and confirmed that the old man wasn’t bluffing.

“If you can run fast enough to escape Jet’s claws, I’ll give you permission to travel the depths.”

“You will?”

“Of course. A man doesn’t go back on his word!”

The rules were simple: the adventurers would start at the center of the training hall, while Jet would stand opposite the exit. If five of them

managed to leave the room, they won. If five of them were knocked out, Jet won. Gammod decided that having half of them survive was more realistic than expecting all of them to make it out.

The adventurers brightened once they heard the conditions. They were up against a single monster and all they had to do was get half of their crew out of the room. And so, the game of tag began.

“Go!”

“Raah!”

“Come on!”

Their plan was to sacrifice four of their party members so five could make it out. The fastest adventurers made a mad dash for the exit as Miguel tanked Jet head-on to buy them some time and Wander sent out volleys of fire arrows.

“Ha ha! He’s having trouble fighting all four of us!”

“And look at the size of him! He can’t be that fast!”

“He can’t catch us!”

Despite the fact that the advance team was inches from the exit, Jet didn’t move a muscle. The cadets smiled, convinced that they had this one. But it wasn’t as if Jet couldn’t move—he just had no reason to. His thick fur blocked all of Miguel’s attacks, and a swipe of his paw was enough to dispel Wander’s fiery arrows. Jet took a deep breath and let out a loud roar.

“Awoooooo!”

The adventurers stopped in their tracks. They froze like stone statues with fear. Jet’s howl was imbued with Roar, Fear, and Shadow Magic. It inflicted lower level enemies with terror.

“Ah...”

“Eek...”

“Woof.”

Jet ignored the frozen adventurers and melted into the shadows. The cadets balked when the giant wolf reappeared at the exit, blocking their path to victory.

“Bark!”

Jet sent the five adventurers back to the center with a claw swipe

and a shadow spell. I thought that would be enough to make them give up, but the adventurers still looked motivated. They thought they still had a fighting chance.

“Come on! Together now!”

“Gooo!”

The adventurers coordinated themselves. However, Jet’s fur deflected all physical attacks, and he immediately regenerated from the few miraculous strikes that made it through.

“No!”

“One more time!”

They kept trying, changing their tactics again. Slowly but surely, they managed to pull Jet away from the exit. Unfortunately, they only managed it because he was going easy on them. Miguel had taken on the role of bait, and Jet chased him. The direwolf could easily have secured victory by simply standing guard at the entrance, but he knew they couldn’t train that way.

Meanwhile, Dufaux and four others rushed the exit. Their ears were plugged up with cloth in an attempt to lessen the impact of Jet’s roar. At this rate, the five of them would make it while the other four fell to Jet’s claws. They smiled, thinking they had won. Gammod sighed and shook his head. Once again, his pupils had underestimated Jet’s powers.

“When will they learn...”

“Grrr!”

Jet wiped out the four decoys with a single shadow spell before they’d bought their friends a single second. The runners were visibly shaken, but they kept on running regardless. The exit was right before them, but in the end, they couldn’t outrun Jet. He chased them down with unbelievable speed.

“I-Impossible...”

“So fast!”

They realized that Jet had been going easy on them. His actual speed and strength were off the charts. They didn’t know what to do. Running away was out of the question. All they could do was desperately try to fight back...

They didn't put up much of a fight. The first adventurer fell with a single claw swipe. The second was flattened to the ground with Jet's paw. The third fell unconscious with a tackle, and the fourth with a tail swipe. Finally, a shadow spell pierced Dufaux's abdomen, leaving him half dead. It had taken all of thirty seconds. If they were out in the field, they would all be dead. Anyone with half a brain could see that.

"Jet wins!"

"Awooooo!"

Jet howled with delight. He hadn't had the chance to go wild for a while.

"That concludes the sparring session!"

The adventurers looked haggard, even as their wounds were being healed. There was no way they could survive the depths of a Haunt. I hoped it would stop them from doing anything reckless.

"Come here, Fran. Just leave the healing to Beth."

"Got it."

Gammod and Fran returned to his office, giving time for the adventurers to cool their heads. The Guildmaster was more than pleased with the results. He grinned, looking like he had gotten away with a horrible crime.

"That was perfect. Sorry it took so long."

"It's alright. I learned a lot today."

"Did you, now?"

"Hm. Thank you very much."

Fran bowed her head in gratitude. At first glance, the express purpose had been to knock some sense into the pigheaded youngsters, but was that really all there was to it? Maybe he also wanted to advise Fran in the process. *Don't get cocky. There are people far stronger than you. You're going to die if you stick your head where it doesn't belong.* Fran understood the Guildmaster's intention and thanked him. Gammod turned away, slightly flustered. The stubborn dwarf would never admit it, but he'd also had Fran in mind when he scheduled the sparring match.

"Whoa now, I didn't do anything that deserves a thank-you."

"Hm. I still want to."

“You’re still young. Just take it slow.”

“Loud and clear.”

Fran took her reward, and we left the guild.

We can finally look for that boat now.

“Hm. Let’s hurry up and get it over with.”

“Woof!”

Well, you two seem awfully motivated for once.

Were they still riding the wave of the sparring session?

“We’re having Io’s curry for dinner tonight.”

“Woof.”

“And we’re not going to be late.”

“Arf.”

Fran and Jet nodded in unison. Their appetites were perfectly aligned. If we couldn’t find a boat, we wouldn’t make it to the orphanage in time. If that happened, they couldn’t eat Io’s curry. Therefore, we should find a boat as fast as possible! Perfect logic. I appreciated their motivation, but I didn’t want to get on any old ship. If we couldn’t find the right one today, we could leave it until tomorrow. I’d rather do that than have Fran sulk over missing Io’s curry.

“Let’s go to the harbor.”

I just hope there are Beastman Nation ships in port.

Fran might be able to hitch a ride as a guard. We had the Beast King’s insignia, and the Black Lightning Princess might be famous enough to be granted a free pass. My main concern was how long the ships were anchored here and whether they would be big enough. I wanted to find an oceangoing vessel instead of a smaller merchant ship. After all, we were making a continental trip. And then there was the problem of the crew. Rigdith said that people of the Beastman Nation had stopped discriminating against Black Cats, but I was sure there were exceptions. I didn’t want anyone giving Fran a hard time because of her race. She might just sink the entire ship.

Let’s take our time.

The port was near enough to the Adventurer's Guild.

"Munch. What about that one?"

"Munch munch."

Too small.

"Munch munch. That one?"

"Scarf scarf."

Fran, don't talk with your mouth full.

Fran and Jet were snacking on curry skewers as they walked about the port. She looked quite the glutton as she shoved skewer after skewer into her mouth.

"Oh."

Did you spot a good ship?

"That looks delicious."

Oh. That's nice.

Fran wandered over to a nearby food stall, attracted by the delectable aroma. The food was quite interesting. Keema curry was wrapped in a cone made from circular bread. It looked like a savory chocolate ice cream.

Now this is weird...

"Tasty."

"Arf arf!"

The number of new curry dishes was increasing, which was exactly the trend I'd hoped for. I prayed the cooks of this world would keep up their creative output so Fran could keep discovering even more delicious foods.

"Yum yum."

"Munch munch."

I just wished she'd pick a better time to enjoy those foods.

We continued exploring the port, buying snacks as we went. I spotted two vessels that had the crest of the Beastman Nation, but they didn't look like the kind of ships we wanted.

One of them was old and beat up and didn't look seaworthy. The tub was a merchant vessel used by one of the smaller trade associations, which meant it was manned with a crew that wasn't particularly good at navigation or combat.

The second boat looked like it could easily survive a cross-continental voyage, but the crew weren't the sort of people we wanted to associate with—they looked like freshly released pirates, and mean ones at that. Technically, they were no longer pirates, but better safe than sorry. We skipped over the ship and kept looking, then Fran suddenly came to a stop.

“Oh.”

What's up? Did you find something tasty again?

“What about that ship?”

Fran pointed to a vessel which also had the insignia of the Beastman Nation.

Oooh, that does look promising.

It was a large, imposing vessel, even while still in port. A ship this size would have no trouble crossing the ocean. I just wondered if the captain would let us on such a flashy boat. A ship of this scale would have its own set of guards and no need for adventurers. Anyway, we should take a closer look.

As we drew closer, a man who looked like a merchant called out to us. He appeared to be a wolf beastman, but he didn't look down on Fran. Then again, traders were exceptionally good at concealing their biases.

“Hello there.”

“Hm?”

“Are you looking for a bodyguard gig?”

“How do you know that?”

The merchant immediately guessed our intention, and Fran put up her guard. I suppose her equipment gave her away. While a normal person might look for ships to take them where they needed to go, adventurers looked for ships where they could exchange their services for free passage.

“How would you like to come work on my ship?”

“Why me?”

Fran immediately went on her guard again. She was still a child. No beginner could look at her and discern her real strength. While the merchant wasn't much of a combatant, he knew exactly what she was capable of. So why the sudden job offer? He must've had some kind of ulterior motive. Maybe the job was a cover-up for an abduction—entice an innocent Black Cat with a bodyguard job and then enslave them.

“Ha ha ha. No self-respecting merchant would miss a chance to get acquainted with the Black Lightning Princess.”

Word must have traveled fast among the traders. It didn't take a shrewd businessman to figure out that the girl with the wolf was the Black Lightning Princess. Hiring her not only meant employing a powerful adventurer, but it came with a certain amount of prestige. A free ride was a small price to pay.

“What do you think?”

Hmm.

As sweet as the deal sounded, we needed to make one thing sure.

“Where are you headed?”

“Continent of Redina. How about it?”

“Nope.”

“Ah, well...”

The merchant looked disappointed when Fran shook her head. I thought he would've been more insistent, but even he couldn't change where his ship was going. He also knew better than to upset an adventurer who beat an A-Rank in a fighting match.

Others called out to her after that, but none of them seemed to be going to Chrome, where the Beastman Nation was. Perhaps the Seedrun incident deterred sailors from using the western route. A lot of ships were going to the Southern continent of Redina, though.

We continued our efforts for another three hours and finally found a vessel that looked promising. The giant symbol of the Beastman Nation was visible even from afar. A boat of this size would have no problems getting where we needed to go. I didn't know much about ships, but I thought they'd called this a galleon back on Earth—although I had read it in a comic book, so I couldn't say for sure

whether the information was accurate. In any case, it was one of the biggest ships in port, with five masts jutting up to the sky. Their flag also bore the royal insignia of the Beast King, meaning that this ship answered directly to Rigdith. If its crew wasn't trustworthy, I didn't know whose would be.

I found the sailors to be neat, disciplined, and even cheerful at times. Their behavior was neither shady nor violent like the pirate-types we saw earlier. Since they answered to the Beast King, we might even get special treatment. After all, we had a personal endorsement from him.

Fran, let's give that boat a try.

"Hm. Got it."

We drew closer to the ship.

Now, how do we talk to the captain?

"Maybe we could talk to those guys."

I'm not sure if the rank and file would recognize you.

These sailors were neither merchants nor adventurers, and they had been out at sea for a long time. Somehow, I didn't think they would have got the memo about Fran. Nothing good would come from talking to them—they would probably dismiss her royal endorsement as fake. At least the captain could tell that it was the real thing.

Should we wait until we see someone who looks like a captain?

"Hm...I'll try talking to them."

Well, if you say so.

That was one way to go about it. I certainly didn't have a better idea. Fran really wanted to get this ship business done. Io's curry awaited her.

"Going in."

"Arf!"

Fran and Jet greeted the sailors, who looked like they were having a meeting.

"Hey."

"Hey there, little girl, how can I..."

"What's the—oh..."

The sailors initially greeted her casually enough, but their smiles soon disappeared. It was as if they had turned to stone. They looked at Fran and Jet and then back again. Had they figured out who Fran was? She ignored their disbelief.

“I’m Fran. Adventurer. I want to see your captain.”

Okay, you could’ve at least tried to be a little polite. They have every right to tell you to buzz off, Fran. But I had no reason to worry.

“U-understood! Right away!”

“I-I’ll go tell the captain!”

They had either gone crazy, or they recognized Fran.

“Y-you’re Fran, right?”

“Hm.”

“A-are you the Black Lightning Princess Fran?”

Rumors about Fran’s exploits had spread farther than I’d thought.

“Yeah.”

“S-s-seriously?! S-sorry, miss! I heard the Black Lightning Princess was Evolved, but...”

Of course! I had forgotten that beastmen could read each other’s Evolution levels. That was how Fran knew White Wolf Aurel and the Beast King were Evolved. The sailors, meanwhile, were confused, since they had heard Fran was an Evolved Black Cat, but Stealth Evolution concealed the apparent signs.

Fran ignored the man’s questions and carried on the conversation. “You’ve never seen an Evolved Black Cat before?”

“Uh, can’t say I have. You’re the first one I’ve seen, and I’ve met a lot of beastmen in my work.”

Fran was the only Evolved Black Cat so far. That made sense. Breaking the curse was borderline impossible, especially if you didn’t know how. A Black Cat had to kill a thousand Fiends or a single Fiend of A-Threat or higher. I feel like the latter requirement was only there for formality’s sake. Beating an A-Threat Fiend by yourself was impossible under normal circumstances—the requirement was there as an allowance for miracles.

Defeating a thousand Fiends was more achievable. Once word got

out, I could imagine Black Cats forming Fiend-hunting parties. There was a high likelihood that one of them would Evolve into a Black Sky Tiger. And what happened when you made a party consisting of Black Sky Tigers? Well, they might break the race curse by defeating an S-Threat Fiend. There was a nonzero chance of it, at least. Even the gods wouldn't turn away from a race that helped them exterminate the Fiends—the penance might even be enough to make up for their ancestors' sins. Unfortunately, the plan was distorted by the actions of the previous Beast Kings, but things were different now with Rigdith in charge. He was more than willing to inform the realms about the requirements for breaking the Black Cat curse. We were heading to the Beastman Nation so Fran could help.

The sailor soon returned with a formidable-looking man in tow. His body was covered with muscle, and he was thick as he was tall. He looked intimidating enough just standing there, and I wouldn't have been surprised if he used to be a pirate. He certainly rocked the pirate hat he wore, though it bore the mark of the royal family instead of a skull and crossbones.

"I'm the captain of this ship. The name's Jerome."

The captain was not a beastman, oddly enough. I guess others inhabited the Beastman Nation. Humans were allowed in, too.

"What have we here? The Black Lightning Princess herself?"

And of course, the captain already knew her.

"Hm."

"No kidding! The merchants wouldn't shut up about you!" Jerome bellowed with laughter. His laugh was friendly enough, and he didn't seem like a bad person. "So, what brings you here?"

"I'm looking for a boat that's going to Beastman Nation."

"And you're offering your services as a bodyguard in exchange for passage?"

"Hm."

"Ha ha ha! Well, that solves our bodyguard problem!"

"So you'll let me on?"

"Of course! With powers like yours, I'd hire you full time if I could!" The captain saw Fran's strength with a glance.

Fran, show him the thing.

“Hm. Here.”

Fran showed the captain the identification she’d received from the Beast King.

“His Majesty’s crest, I see...”

“It’s real.”

“No reason for the Black Lightning Princess to be carrying a fake. Still, I’ll have this verified if you don’t mind.”

We didn’t. I didn’t expect Jerome to ignore proper protocol. Either way, he must’ve heard news about Fran’s placement in the fighting tournament and how she gained the Beast King’s attention.

“I’ll have to go to the Adventurer’s Guild to post a proper quest. They’ll give me an earful if I don’t. Hope that’s okay with you.”

He couldn’t hire us on the spot, but there was no harm in it. In fact, going through the guild allowed them to run proper identity checks and credit the adventurer with the quest. It was the clear choice for those with nothing to hide.

“Go for it.”

“Alright, it’s about time I head to the guild. You wanna come with?”

“What’s the occasion?”

“Posting the guard request, of course.”

I was surprised to hear such a large vessel was employing adventurers. I thought Jerome was only letting Fran on board because she was the Black Lightning Princess, but the ship genuinely needed more personnel.

“Not that I don’t trust you, Fran. But I have my reasons.”

According to the captain, it was customary for ships to hire a certain number of adventurers to maintain the bond between crown and guild. Experienced adventurers also came in handy in a pinch, and so most vessels gladly hired them before every voyage. Apparently, there were even adventurers who specialized in protecting ships. The field must’ve been quite lucrative. We learned a lot during our walk to the guild.

Upon publication, Fran immediately accepted the captain's quest.

"When are you leaving?"

"In three days, if all goes well." Schedules shifted based on storms and sea monsters.

"Alright. See you in three days."

"Sure thing. Looking forward to working with you."

"Hm. Me, too."

They shook hands before going their separate ways. In three days, we would board that gigantic ship and I was quite excited. I rode ferries back on Earth, but I'd never been on a wooden boat across the ocean.

Chapter 3: Open Waters

“MUNCH MUNCH MUNCH!”

“Nom nom nom!”

Dinner at the orphanage. Fran and Jet shoveled down Io’s curry with amazing fervor.

“What healthy appetites you have!”

Their enjoyment made Io smile, although I sensed that she was slightly worried about the state of their stomachs. I certainly couldn’t help them if they got stomachaches.

“You’re so fast, Fran!”

“And Jet’s not slacking off, either!”

Where had all the curry gone? Was it really okay for us to eat so much?

“There’s more where that came from. Fill yourselves up,” Io said, bringing out more food.

She had already done the math on how much she needed, I just wished she would stop giving Fran and Jet seconds. I was legitimately worried about them.

“Hm! I will!”

“Woof woof!”

See, they were already asking for seconds!

“How much do you want?”

“Extra big.”

“Arf.”

Fran and Jet didn’t know the meaning of restraint. As good as the orphanage was doing financially, there was a limit as to how much of their food budget we could eat. We definitely needed to repay them. Fran and Jet soon demolished an extra-large serving and received gasps of awe and admiration from the orphans.

Still, a cloud of sorrow hung over the children. Any leftover curry would be served as breakfast the next day, but there would be no leftovers after Fran scraped the curry pot. Some of the kids were betting on how many plates she could finish. The losers shook their heads in frustration.

“That was good.”

“Woof.”

“Thank you. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“Hm. Real tasty.”

Fran smiled, and I almost felt jealous. She gave her belly a satisfied pat.

Was it really that good?

Hm! About as tasty as yours!

I see.

I glanced over to the kitchen and found nothing out of the ordinary—just ordinary spices and ingredients. They probably cost a fraction of the ingredients I normally used. Io used ordinary vegetables, ordinary pork, and ordinary spices you could get from the marketplace. In spite of all that, she managed to satisfy Fran to the point of praise... Io really was an amazing cook. She might finally win the cooking contest next year.

“Good night!”

“See you around, Fran!”

“Bye, Jet!”

The kids retired to their rooms or continued their antics in the playroom, leaving Fran and Jet alone with Io. Fran rubbed her belly and sat up. “I’ll be going now.”

“So soon? Won’t you relax and have some tea first?” Io stopped her before she could walk out the door.

“Your brew?”

“Yes. I have some cookies to go with it if you want.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Fran wasn’t going to let the opportunity slide by. She returned to her seat in one fluid motion and Jet followed suit.

“I have something for you, too, Jet.”

Io smiled at the direwolf's silent enthusiasm. She really was a good person. The cookies couldn't just be made from flour, sugar, and eggs. They were delicious. Fran and Jet's reactions made that clear. Although Io used some of the cheapest tea leaves you could find, it was still delicious. Fran and Jet enjoyed its relaxing effects. Io smiled as she watched over them.

Before Fran could leave, Io bowed her head. "Thank you so much."

"Hm?"

"I put a little bit more effort into cooking for you today... but I want to tell you that every meal is filled with smiles."

Anyone would've taken those words as a boast on Io's part, but we knew better.

"Before," Io went on, "the children and I were always worried whether we would have enough to eat. They could still smile, but I could tell they were trying to be strong."

The kids couldn't be carefree when they knew the orphanage might be shut down at any given moment. They weren't stupid—they could see the lack of supplies and the battered and broken building. Not to mention the thugs and loan sharks that dropped in on them from time to time. They knew perfectly well the condition their orphanage was in.

Seeing children in that kind of state was enough to make any adult worry, but that only made the kids feel more anxious about their conditions. It was a vicious cycle, but now the kids laughed loudly and without a care.

"Thank you so much for bringing the children back their smiles."

"Amanda's the one who helped."

"Yes, and the orphanage is deeply indebted to her. But you were the one who told her about us, and for that we thank you from the bottom of our hearts."

Io bowed deeply.

"Hm..." Fran didn't know what to do. She felt uncomfortable and had to force a wry smile, but I noticed her cheeks were flushed.

Io was embarrassed by Fran's awkward reception. Fortunately,

they enjoyed each other's company, so the awkward atmosphere remained friendly and was soon replaced with warm conversation. Io talked about the children and Fran nodded happily, then it was time for Io to tuck the oldest of the children into bed. We needed to get going, too.

"I'll be going now."

"Thank you for coming to dinner."

"No problem."

Io saw her off to the entrance. Fran and I thought about how to repay her for all the food, but she refused to take our money.

"But I ate most of your pantry."

"Don't worry about it. Tonight's dinner was meant to thank you. I can't accept payment for that." Io didn't look like she would change her mind.

Teacher, what do we do?

Well, it would be very rude of us to pay off someone who wanted to thank us. Forcing her to accept our money would probably make Io sad.

So in the end, we thanked Io and left the orphanage.

"Bye."

"Goodbye. Come again any time."

"Hm. Definitely."

"You're always welcome here."

Fran hummed to herself, in a good mood the entire walk back to the inn.

Was the curry really that good?

"Hm!"

Oh no! I'll have to put my chef's hat on!

"But that's not all."

Yeah?

"It was so much fun eating with everyone. With Io and all the kids."

You're right.

“Hm. That was really nice.”

Fran smiled. She sympathized with the orphans, having lost her parents, too. Seeing them happy really made her happy.

I'm glad to hear that.

“Hm.”

We had three days before we had to set off. We spent that time just chilling—walking around town looking for good eats and lazing about. We dropped by the orphanage again. Although Io only served us tea and biscuits at such an odd hour, that was fine for us. By the time we were done, we left Io a little something for the tea. And while we would never admit it, we left a little something for the curry, too. Since money was too obvious, we gave her a care package of flour, sugar, and spices.

The morning of our voyage finally arrived, and we made our way to the harbor.

We can finally go to the Beastman Nation.

“Hm. Looking forward to it.”

We're on actual guard duty now. Don't think you can relax like last time.

“Wouldn't have it any other way.”

I remembered the last time we got on a boat. Fult and Satya, the royal twins of Phyllius, gave us a ride to Bulbola under the pretense of a guard job, but we ended up getting a lot more. I could look back on it fondly now, but at the time it was a series of very intense encounters.

First of all was our battle with the giant sea serpent, Midgardsormr. That monster took all of our strongest attacks and kept squirming. The only thing we could do was slow it down and try to get away. We had gotten a lot stronger now, so I doubted the smaller monsters would be able to stop us. But even Fran wasn't sure if we could take down a Midgardsormr. She was more than ready to give it a shot, though, especially considering we now had a few tricks that could potentially roast the great serpent underwater. Still, Fran could only give me a shrug.

I don't think we'll run into that thing again. It's quite rare.

We had to remain on guard for other sea monsters, of course.

When we arrived at the ship, the captain and his crew welcomed us. They halted their discussion when they saw Fran approach.

“Fran the Black Lightning Princess. We’ll be in your care for this voyage. Allow me to properly introduce myself. My name is Jerome, captain of the *Algieba*.”

“Hm. C-Rank adventurer Fran. Nice to meet you.”

Fran and Jerome shook hands and smiled at each other, seemingly on the same wavelength. Although, you had to know what to look for to notice Fran’s smile.

“You! Bring Fran to the first mate!”

“Aye, Captain.”

“I have embarkation protocol to take care of. He’ll fill you in,” Jerome said before going to speak to the port authorities.

Documentation needed to be filed before we could set sail. On Earth, ships couldn’t embark on a whim, and I was sure this world had similar protocols. And the sheer size of the *Algieba* would cause trouble for other vessels if it suddenly left for open waters.

“This way.”

“Hm.”

The sailor led Fran up a wooden ramp, although it was so big that it looked more like scaffolding. The thing wasn’t perfectly straight, and we had to zigzag our way up. I counted over a hundred steps just to get onto the ship—it really was gigantic. Sailors went about the deck, going about their business. Our guide called out to the one directing the whole affair.

“First mate!”

“Yes? Oh, is this the last of them?”

“Aye. This is Fran the adventurer.”

“C-Rank adventurer Fran, at your service.”

“I am First Mate Buffet.”

There were many variations of beastmen, and Buffet seemed to be the weaker sort. This was the first time I’d encountered someone with the head of a goat. However, despite his animal appearance, he was a perfect gentleman. He bowed courteously, although I had a sneaking

suspicion he wasn't of much use in battle. A quick Identify confirmed that he was much more suited to management. His only battle-related skills were Bow Mastery and Spear Mastery, but he more than made up for that with high levels of Trade, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, and Measurement. He was more than qualified to be Jerome's first mate.

His beastman species really made me wonder. How could I not? The man had the head of a white goat. I worried about the possibility of him being eaten by more carnivorous beastmen.

"Captain Jerome told me about you. So you are the Black Lightning Princess that everyone's been talking about... I'm sorry, but I still find it difficult to believe."

"Captain said she's the real deal, though."

"Hm. You can check my ID."

"Of course, and I trust the captain. But I am not a man of combat and you look like a greenhorn adventurer to me. I am sorry if I've offended you." Buffet bowed his head in apology. Despite being unable to tell how strong Fran was, he trusted his captain's judgment.

"Don't worry about it. Happens all the time."

"Ha ha ha. I'm almost glad to hear that. Alright, let's round up the other adventurers so you can break the ice."

"I'll try."

"Just wait here."

The first mate signaled to one of the sailors to bring in the other adventurers.

"How many are there?"

"Twelve, including you. We have combatants among the crew, but the guild can get a little irritating if we don't take some adventurers along."

I remembered a conversation about cooperation between the Beastman Nation and the Adventurer's Guild. While the guild didn't force the boats to hire adventurers, it would cause relations to sour. The great galleon *Algieba* was a merchant vessel with a direct route to the Beastman Nation and it employed more than its fair share of adventurers, at least compared to smaller tubs.

"You're the only solo adventurer today."

“How strong are they?”

“I can’t say. There is a C-Rank party, a D-Rank party, and an E-Rank party. The leader of the C-Rank party is reportedly a B-Rank adventurer.”

Really? It sounded like we were in quite competent company. Although I worried about having to follow a chain of command. I didn’t mind another party taking the lead, but I doubted Fran would be willing to follow orders.

“There they are.”

The adventurers filed in. There were multiple parties in this one group.

“Strong...”

Yeah.

The fighter at the head of the group caught my attention. His skin tanned into wheat brown and his brilliant silver hair was tied into a topknot. Coupled with his height, the man looked quite imposing. His deeply carved face was more dandy than handsome. I thought he was in his forties. Either way, he was strong. Even his footsteps carried the weight of authority. This man was definitely the B-Rank.

Hmm?

His face felt familiar somehow, like I had seen him somewhere before.

I’ve definitely seen that blue armor...but where?

I couldn’t remember. Maybe I caught a glimpse of him in the guild hall? No, he’d left a deeper impression than that.

“Right this way, Sir Mordred.”

His name was Mordred. I hoped we would be alright, because his namesake was a traitor.

“Allow me to introduce you to our final guard.”

However, it was the smaller man next to Mordred who answered.

“Hey. Did you really have to bring our boss out here to meet this little girl?” The small man glared menacingly at the sailor. “She should be the one coming to his quarters!”

The tiny man was very annoying, but he had a point. Anyone

looking at this exchange would think that Mordred far outclassed a little girl. His party nodded in agreement. Their value was hooked to their leader, and they were underestimated in the same measure.

The atmosphere turned awkward. To make matters worse, the small man took a step forward and even placed a hand on his weapon.

“Boss! Let me teach these guys a lesson for—”

“You’ve embarrassed me enough for one day, Surnin,” Mordred cut in before he could finish.

“Huh?”

“The weak have to pay respect to the strong. Which is why I came here.”

“Wh-what are you saying, boss!” Surnin balked in disbelief, and he wasn’t the only one shocked. The other parties were equally surprised. Fran was about the only one who kept a straight face as Mordred bowed his head in greeting.

“I apologize for my men’s rudeness.”

“Hm. Don’t worry about it.”

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Mordred. Leader of the C-Rank party Breath of the Steel God.”



“Fran. C-Rank adventurer.”

Surnin and the others let out a surprised gasp. She was stronger than they were, but it was obvious to everyone present that Mordred was her better.

“Also known as the Black Lightning Princess, yes?” Mordred asked.

“I’ve been hearing that a lot lately.”

“I knew it. I saw you fight in the tournament.”

“You were in Ulmutt?”

“I fought in Ulmutt! Although Phelms knocked me out in the second round.”

I knew I had seen him somewhere before. We watched him fight in Ulmutt. The same flash of remembrance struck Fran.

“You’re the one with Steel Magic?”

We were quite impressed by it. Who knew that had been Mordred? We learned much of the possibilities of Steel Magic because of how expertly he handled it.

“You remember?”

“Hm. You put up a great fight.” The memories of that match were still fresh in Fran’s mind.

“Thanks. That means a lot coming from the one who beat Phelms.”

“Uhh...boss?” Mordred’s party were still puzzled and confused. Did they not watch the tournament?

“While you were busy in the Crystal Cage, this girl took third place in the Ulmutt tournament. She’s as powerful as an A-Rank.”

“What?!”

“Seriously?!”

“No way...!”

I see. So Mordred went to Ulmutt by himself.

“Yeah. She’s way stronger than I am.”

Mordred’s words didn’t take long to sink in.

“We’re so sorry!”

The adventurers fell on their faces in instant apology. I appreciated their humility. Fran didn’t look upset, either. Instead, she watched with fascination as the men prostrated themselves.

“I know they’re dumb, but they don’t mean any harm. Can you find it in your heart to forgive them?”

“Not even mad.”

“Thank you for your understanding, ma’am!”

Mordred’s men would’ve fit right in at an athletics club, although I thought the diving apology was a little much. Still, they executed it with perfect harmony, and it made me wonder if they’d practiced the maneuver in the past.

The adventurers of Breath of the Steel God sighed with relief. They introduced themselves meekly, with an aura of reverence. I was surprised that a single statement from Mordred was all it took. Usually, people insisted on underestimating Fran, despite being told otherwise. It showed how much the party trusted Mordred. They knew he wouldn’t lie to them.

I wasn’t sure if Fran was “way stronger” than Mordred. In her Awakened state, sure. But in her ordinary state, I didn’t think that there was a large gap between them. From what I remembered, he was an experienced warrior mage—maybe up there with Colbert. He shouldn’t be taken lightly.

“These four are my party members.”

“Very pleased to meet you!”

“Hm. Same. I’m Fran, and this is Jet.”

“Woof!”

“Wh-where’d that wolf come from?!”

“From the shadows, I think!”

“Ooh. He’s a strong one.”

“Hm. Reliable.”

Unlike his men, Mordred didn’t panic at Jet’s appearance. Instead, he smiled and nodded, appreciating the addition of strength. The other adventurers only stared at Jet from a safe distance, unsure what to

think.

“I’ll introduce you to the rest. These guys are D-Rank party Red Earth.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Yo.”

“Sup.”

I assumed the leader was the serious one, contrasted by the two lax men at his sides. Red Earth was a strange party. First of all, there were strange scales on the faces and arms of all its members—they were probably snake beastmen. Their bodies were of the same slender build, but what struck me as odd was that their faces looked remarkably similar, and all of them wielded dual blades.

“You all look the same.”

“Aha ha. We’re brothers, you see. We wanted to see the world and decided to be adventurers. We took this job because it’s time we came back home.”

The brothers had all been trained by their father, and they had the same skill set. Really, they were more like triplets than merely brothers. Hairstyle was about the only way to tell them apart. Although, I could just identify who we were talking with to be extra sure.

They had scales where their eyebrows should have been and looked quite intimidating. However, they seemed like a good crowd, despite their thuggish appearance. The eldest was stern where his brothers were laid back. They didn’t seem to discriminate against Black Cats, either. I had a good feeling about these guys.

“And lastly, E-Rank party Crystal Guardians.”

“H-hello.”

“We met just the other day.”

“Aha ha.”

The last three adventurers introduced themselves sheepishly. They needed no introduction, of course. These were the rookies Fran demolished in the training room the other day. Miguel the greatsword wielder, Riddick the stoic spearman, and Naria the archeress.

“What, you’re already acquainted?”

“You could say that. She crushed us a few days ago on the training grounds.”

“I see... You’re the Guildmaster’s pupils, right? I have to admit, I’m jealous that you got to spar with the Black Lightning Princess. But it’s nice that you know each other.”

I was just thankful there weren’t any skeptics and that Fran didn’t have to demonstrate her powers.

“What are you guys doing here?”

“You made us realize, very painfully, that we were all still immature.”

“There used to be nine of us, and we got complacent because we relied on our numbers.”

“We decided to split up and train in groups of three.”

The sparring session bore fruit after all. The rookies had finally learned to fear death.

“I see. Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ll do our best!”

“We hope you’ll continue to instruct us whenever possible!”

With the introductions out of the way, the rest of the adventurers left to give Fran and Mordred room to talk. The pack would willingly follow the orders of whoever ended up in charge.

“Now, let’s decide on who gets the final say. Personally, I don’t mind following your orders. How about it?”

Mordred deferred to Fran’s superior strength. He placed a high premium on combat, and he didn’t mind following a little girl’s orders as long as she was stronger than him. But a leadership position was impossible for Fran, and by extension, for me as well. Neither of us had the experience, nor the knowledge for it. I thanked Mordred for his honest appraisal of Fran’s abilities, but the B-Rank would be more suited for the job.

“I can’t give orders.”

“What now then?”

“You be commander. Just treat me as your shortstop.”

That was our greatest technique: give somebody else the pain-in-the-ass job! *Shortstop* was Fran's shorthand for a role to do whatever she pleased. I just hoped Mordred would take the bait...

"Alright, that works. But I'd appreciate it if you inform me of whatever it is you plan to do."

"Hm. No problem."

"I feel weird giving orders to someone stronger than me," said Mordred. "But you'll probably have to follow them in case of emergencies."

"Of course."

"Alright then." Mordred sighed. He knew that Fran had just given him more responsibility.

"I suppose that concludes your discussion," said the first mate. "Allow us to show you to your quarters, Fran."

"Hm. Thanks."

The young sailor led Fran to her room. "Hope you don't mind. The space is a little tight."

"No problem. All I need is a bed."

"Don't worry, ma'am, a bed's not the only thing you have."

Fran's room was located right next to a hatch leading to the deck. I supposed that this was the room they assigned to the stronger combatants, so they could immediately jump in if there was an attack.

"Right this way."

"Hm. It's a good room."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," the sailor said, believing Fran's words to be mere politeness.

Fran was serious, of course. I quite liked the room, too. I liked it a lot, actually. It was small, but it was a proper room. The bed came with clean sheets and a chest right next to it. There was even a proper desk and closet. Thanks to the light-emitting manatech decorating the ceiling, it was also classier than the cheap inns.

But nothing got my attention like the window. The porthole was perfectly round, the very picture of a ship's window. Light streamed through the small portal, bringing light to the dark room. It was a

simple sight, but it was enough to make me feel like I was really on a boat. Fran didn't hate it, either. She sat on the bed, playfully flapping her feet about.

"I love this room," she said in an excited whisper.

Me, too.

Fran lazed about the room until a sailor came to fetch her and led us to the captain's quarters.

"Black Lightning Princess here to see you, Captain."

"Come in!"

The captain's quarters weren't too far away. I suppose it allowed him to get on deck immediately. The captain had taken off his coat to reveal his rough exterior. He got up to greet Fran.

"I heard your first meeting with the adventurers went smoothly. Did it?"

"No problems."

"Good." The captain breathed a sigh of relief.

Was he really that worried? I supposed the rumors circulating about Fran didn't paint her as the picture of patience. She was liable to grind some faces into the floor, if only to prove a point. And Fran was among the strongest of the ship's escorts—if she came into conflict with Mordred, Jerome would've had to figure how to mediate. He would have had to side with one or the other of them—a difficult decision for any captain.

"We'll probably run into monsters out at sea and maybe the occasional pirate. You're free to do what you want until they show up. Just try not to let your guard down."

The contract was quite lax. Really, this was the only way to satisfy all parties. Adventurers specialized in travel and exploration, and there were very few even acquainted with naval combat. There were even fewer experts who could immediately deal with the sudden appearances of sea monsters. Ships' captains didn't ask adventurers to spot monsters but to kill any that happened to be in the way. That meant a lot of free time, of course, on the condition that they sprang into action at the first sign of threat. It went without saying that hired adventurers were not allowed to drink or cause trouble for the crew. Such actions would be penalized.

“Hm. Got it. I’ll just explore the ship, then.”

“I don’t know if there’s anything to explore, but if it suits your fancy, go for it.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Well...as long as you don’t go messing around the crew’s quarters. And don’t go fiddling about with the propulsion manatech, either.”

“I won’t.”

“We don’t have anything to hide, but don’t make a mess of the storeroom and stay out of any place that says Keep Out.”

“So I can walk around? What if I steal something?”

“I have faith in our contract with the Adventurer’s Guild. Besides, I don’t think anyone of your level would risk demotion over something like that.”

In any case, we got permission to look around. I couldn’t wait.

“Anyway, do you have your Beastman Nation identification with you? I’ll check it now.”

“Here.”

“Timespace Magic...handy stuff. I wish I had it.”

“Hm. Convenient.”

“The ultimate magic for merchants...” Jerome muttered as he watched Fran’s Pocket Dimension. While he wasn’t a merchant himself, he *was* the captain of a merchant vessel. “Let’s see here...” Jerome pressed the ring on his finger to the emblem. The ring looked like it was used to authenticate the validity of the plaque. There was a faint pulse of mana emitting from it. “Yep, it’s the real deal alright.”

“Hm.”

“We’re departing around noon. Organize with Mordred in the meantime.”

“Sure. Where’s he staying?”

“It should be right next to your room. I could assign one of my men to take you there if you want.”

“I’m good.”

We had no trouble finding Mordred's room. It was two doors down from ours and it fitted three people. Mordred occupied it with his subordinates.

The subject of our meeting was guard order: basically, there would be a night shift once every four days. We let him decide the best schedule for us, and didn't raise any objections. He also went over some basics about guard quests that Fran didn't know about—mostly regarding monsters killed on the trip.

All the materials and crystals acquired on the ride belonged to the client. In exchange, adventurers received a bonus according to the number of monsters they killed. The bonus would be distributed equally among everyone on guard duty, so as not to spoil relations. If bonuses were determined on individual performance, people might start slacking off. If adventurers wanted more pay, they would have to work together.

If there were still parties who insisted on slacking off, their pay would be deducted. However, the client would also report this party to the guild and undoubtedly would start telling all his friends. Slackers would only be making their lives more difficult.

We had no problems with the terms and conditions since Jerome had explained them to us when he issued the contract. Unfortunate as it was, I would have to give up on crystals for a while.

"Looking forward to working with you."

"Hm. Same here."

The two shook hands, and Fran returned to her room. All that was left was to wait for the ship to leave.

Fran looked through the porthole and fluffed Jet's fur. "Teacher."

What's up?

Her expression was grave. Did she sense a dangerous presence? "I'm hungry."

Oh, of course.

I looked at the clock and saw that it was lunchtime. Fran's stomach was always a reliable timekeeper. A knock came at the door just as we were about to go to the mess hall. Since it was Fran's first day there, one of the crew members offered to take her. When we got there, a tough-looking man was serving plates to crew members and adventurers alike.

“Hey there! You an adventurer, too, little lady?”

“Hm.”

“Alright then! Now, I’m not sure if your tiny belly can handle this much food, but—”

“No problem. Give me more. That’s not enough.”

“Ga ha ha ha! That’s what I like to hear! Okay, but you better finish it all, or it’s the dishes for you!”

“Hm.”

Jet leaped out of the shadows, unable to restrain himself. He whined, begging Fran not to forget about him. “Bark bark!”

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot about you, Jet.”

“Arf...”

“Does that wolf want some, too?”

“Please.”

“One wolf-size portion, coming right up!”

Good thing they kept provisions for familiars. The chef recited the menu to Fran while she waited. It was all quite extravagant—at least as good as a restaurant. This world looked a lot like the Middle Ages, but magic allowed them to preserve food even without refrigerators. Keeping a fresh stock of ingredients didn’t take up a lot of resources. It was possible the scurvy didn’t exist in this world—the foods available certainly didn’t seem suited to prevent it. Since the *Algieba* was a big ship, the menu was even more luxurious.

What a great contract. It even comes with free food.

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

Delicious free food, at that. Fran and Jet greedily lapped up their pasta. The sailor-size portion was definitely enough to satisfy her appetite.

With lunch out of the way, Fran returned to her room. She couldn’t sit still for very long, but the room had caught her attention. As she lazed about in bed, the floor rumbled. Fran jolted upright and looked around, ridding me of any suspicion that I had just imagined it.

“Did you feel that?”

A little bit. I think the ship's leaving port.

A tub this large wouldn't be affected by small waves, but it wasn't exempt from the usual shakes that all ships went through on leaving port.

"I'll go and see."

Sure.

Fran hurried to the deck, rushed to the side of the ship, and looked down. The wharf was already several meters away.

And we're off.

"Hm."

"Woof."

The scenery moved past us. There was no cutting of tape or breaking of champagne bottles. The *Algieba* was not a passenger ship, and the port saw too much traffic for such ceremonies. No one was going to see us off.

We're going pretty fast.

The ship was a lot quicker than I expected. All of the sails were still tied to their masts, and there were no powerful ocean winds to help us along. Our acceleration must have been due to the propulsion manatech. I wondered how big it would have to be to drive a vessel this size. Did it use physical propellers? Maybe it used jets of water or wind. The mystery of it intrigued me.

Let's go have a look once things settle down.

"Explore!"

Sure.

Jerome approached as Fran watched the ship surge toward open waters. "Anything caught your eye?"

"We're moving."

The captain understood once he saw the light in her eyes. "Of course. Oooh, of course. You're not used to being on boats, are ya?"

"Hm. I've never been on a boat this big."

"I see."

"This thing moves with manatech?"

“That’s right. She’s equipped with the latest in propulsion manatech. That’s not all she’s got, either. She also has a cloaking system to avoid large monsters, and eight manatech cannons.”

The *Algieba* sounded like it was armed with state-of-the-art technology. It looked like an old medieval ship, but it was definitely far more advanced. The manatech engine allowed the ship to move even in windless conditions, and probably came in handy for minute course correction. I wondered why they bothered hiring adventurers with a cloaking device on board.

Fran asked the question, and the captain explained that the cloaking field wasn’t perfect. It only shielded the ship from large monsters, which meant that other monsters were still fair game. It was designed primarily to avoid the creatures that lurked in the depths of the ocean—monsters big enough to sink the ship with little effort. But the *Algieba* still had ways of dealing with small to medium monsters—its bilge generated a pulse that warded off any curious monsters that came near. That said, it didn’t always work, and there would always be stubborn monsters that insisted on attacking.

But all of those measures were useless against pirates. Of course, a sensible pirate wouldn’t attack a ship in the royal armada—equipped with armaments and able to defend itself with lethal force. Attacking such a vessel was equivalent to slapping a nation across the face. Any pirate foolish enough to try would bring the wrath of a kingdom down on their entire profession.

On the other hand, pirates targeting *Algieba* might have armadas of their own. Jerome said it had happened more times than he cared to count. Naval combat broke out, and the crew of the *Algieba* had to put its manatech cannons to good use. Each vessel maneuvered for optimal firing position, though sometimes boarding was unavoidable. That was when adventurers earned their keep.

“Hope you’ll give us a good show, Black Lightning Princess.”

“Hm. You’ll get one.”

“Ha ha ha! I like your tone, kid! Looks like we’re in for a safe voyage!”

In the day after the ship left port, we quickly took to exploring the *Algieba*. Having made our rounds of the top deck, we went one level below. There wasn't much to look at there, since the rooms mostly consisted of the crew's quarters, which we were not allowed to enter. I guessed their quarters were concentrated near the top deck so they could react in an emergency.

"Another storeroom."

It's a merchant vessel after all.

"Hmm...smells good."

This must be where they keep the foodstuff.

Below the crew's quarters were the storerooms, filled with box upon box. They looked like they had been forced inside the room with manatech. I certainly couldn't explain the impeccably efficient arrangement. Fran had fun peeking inside. She nodded and sometimes tilted her head in confusion at the contents. There were rare foods and artistic implements of strange design—more than enough to satisfy her adolescent curiosity.

"On to the next one."

Sure.

We left the storerooms and walked to a room on the other side of the ship.

"I can see the outside from here. What's this weird thing?"

Black steel spheres rested in a room with tall and narrow windows. They were lying next to a long cylinder that looked like an instrument of war.

"What's this?"

Fran couldn't tell. For anyone who hadn't seen it before, it was difficult to understand. I could only figure it out because I had seen something similar in my past life. They were a staple in the video games I used to play.

Cannons, of the manatech variety. You use mana to shoot these cannonballs.

"Why go to the trouble?"

Well, I think it's a matter of mana efficiency. Propelling a cannonball doesn't take as much mana as a full-blown spell. But just because it operates on mana doesn't mean it can run forever.

The prime advantage was that the cannon could fire mana as well as cannonballs. The cannonballs were for enemy ships, while manashot was for whatever monster the ocean threw at us. This dual action was probably what contributed to their sheer size. The cannons were a lot bigger than the ones on Earth.

We went down another level and arrived at the ship's bilge. Half of it was taken up by the ballast, while the other housed a gigantic piece of manatech. The large machinery whirled and hummed, sending vibrations through the pit of your stomach. Several men in overalls tended to the giant manatech—they must've been the thing's technicians.

"Who's there?"

"Fran. Adventurer. Guarding the ship. I'm exploring."

"Oh, I see. You've found the heart of the *Algieba*. Please don't come any closer."

"Got it." Fran stopped and observed the machine from afar. "It's big."

This must be the propulsion engine.

"Hm. Real loud."

So water comes out from there... It's kind of like a giant pump.

The manatech functioned like a gigantic water jet, moving the ship by forcing water out of large tubes. These tubes were installed in several locations over the bilge, making it easier to turn tight corners.

That about covers the entire ship.

Hm! That was fun!

We returned to the upper levels. Fran was feeling restless, so she wanted to practice her swordsmanship. *Can I do it at the top deck?*

Don't see why not. We'll find a quiet corner so we don't bother anyone.

The ship's crew was hard at work when we surfaced. Jerome was giving them orders to unfurl the sails. "We're a good distance away from port! Set sail, boys!"

“Aye!”

“Look alive, sea dogs! Full speed ahead to the Kraken’s Nest!”

With the port of Bulbola safely behind us, we accelerated rapidly. Something Jerome said had caught my ear, though. What was this about Krakens? Back home, that meant a sea creature that looked like a cross between a squid, an octopus, and a jellyfish. These sea monsters were famous for dragging ships down into a watery grave.

Fran approached Jerome to clarify. “What’s the Kraken’s Nest?”

“Fran. Did you have a good tour of the ship?”

“Sure did.”

“Good to hear! The Kraken’s Nest is exactly what you think it is. It’s the dangerous spawning grounds of the beast known as the Kraken!”

“And we’re passing through it?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

I knew the ship had a cloaking system, but wasn’t this asking for trouble?

The captain assured us that it wasn’t so. “Our route will only take us to the border.”

The Kraken was the apex predator of the sea. No other monster dared to come close to their territory, especially the medium-size monsters that were the bulk of a Kraken’s diet.

“As long as we’re careful, we won’t have to worry about any other monsters attacking us.”

“Okay, but what about the Krakens?”

A Kraken attack was serious business, but the ship’s cloaking system was designed to be especially effective against them. Fran pressed the subject, asking about other large monsters. The captain explained that the only large monsters that lived in that part of the ocean were the Krakens.

“Why?”

“Our course from Jillbird to Chrome mostly passes through shallow waters. Comparatively shallow, anyway—it’s still several hundred meters deep.”

Quite shallow, considering how deep the ocean could be.

“B-Threats live in deeper waters, not to mention the Whale King Leviathan and Sea Dragon Dagon. There’s a lot more food for them to snack on there.”

The shallows weren’t enough to feed such colossal beasts. That was why Krakens were the only large monsters in the waters between Jillbird and Chrome.

“Now, the Enchanted Ocean farther north is where the real monsters are. That’s where the S-Threat Leviathan lives.”

The Leviathan was the world’s largest creature, spanning a thousand meters from head to tail. Some attributed tsunamis to the Leviathan turning in its underwater bed. Not much was known about it, since sightings were so few. But the story went that a coastal kingdom once angered the creature and was wiped off the map overnight. The ensuing tsunami was so large that it destroyed all architecture, leaving nothing but an empty island.

The document detailing the attack went on to describe, to everyone’s shock, that the main diet of the Leviathan was Midgardsorms, the A-Threat Sea Worms. Fortunately, even one was enough to satisfy the Whale King for a hundred years, which was why sightings of it were so rare.

The Enchanted Ocean was home to many other giant sea monsters, and no ship charted its course through there. Anyone headed to Brodin from Jillbird was forced to take the western route via Chrome to avoid it. This route was the safest we had. The Krakens had made their nest here, but at least we didn’t have to worry about getting caught up in a fight between a Sea Dragon and a Sea Worm.

“Don’t worry. We have ways of dealing with Krakens.”

“Hm.”

“You just keep us safe from the shrimp paste and pirates.”

“Will do.”

“Counting on you.”

A few days after departure, Fran and the other adventurers were

living quite comfortably. As long as there were no monsters, they ate, slept, and enjoyed the fresh ocean wind as they went about their activities. The rooms were cleaned with Cleansing Magic and the food was well balanced. Item bags meant we could enjoy fresh salad even in the middle of the ocean.

In any case, we weren't going to starve to death. Even if the ship were to run out of food, we could still fish. Today, the crew was fishing with vast nets, and Fran watched curiously as the sailors heaved their catch on board. She even muttered, "Heave!" in imitation of their shouts. It must have been her first time seeing such a thing.

"Ga ha ha! You look like you've never gone fishing before."

"Hm. Not like this."

"You don't say! Well, take it in. You won't get a catch this big on any other ship!"

"Really?"

"You gotta be on a large vessel. Operating manatech this big takes a lot of manpower."

"I see."

"You get a bigger catch with the bigger net, but it also means more monsters eager to steal it. You better know how to operate your sword when that happens. Monsters tend to get caught in these nets, too. One is all you need to wreak havoc."

Maybe Fran and the other adventurers would finally see some action.

"I think our fighters have it covered, but get ready just in case."

"Hm."

The sailors safely hauled their catch while Fran watched over them. The fish lay on the deck like a carpet.

"Is that a fish?"

What? Did you spot a monster?

"That flat one over there."

Oh. Yeah, that's a fish. A monkfish.

Monkfish did look like monsters if you didn't know what you were looking at. Foreigners were grossed out by octopus, but I still thought

that monkfish were more terrifying.

“What’s that?”

That looks like some kind of hagfish.

“And that one?”

Probably a sea cucumber. Huge one, though.

So far, the fantasy fish looked similar to the ones back on Earth. It made me realize how gross sea life could get. In the depths, the line between monster and animal became blurred.

“What’s that?”

Which one?

“That.”

I couldn’t tell which one Fran was pointing at. She reached into the haul and picked up the creature of interest.

“This one.”

Ew, gross!

The thing squirming in Fran’s hand, trying to escape was the most grotesque of the creatures so far. It was like a lump of pulsing red-and-black flesh, and it looked more like stuffed intestines than an actual living thing. On one side of the alien’s body was a hole ringed with sharp, rotating teeth. I had never seen a deep-sea creature as strange as this... I was amazed Fran could hold it in her arms without so much as a second thought.

I screamed the moment I Identified it—I hadn’t felt that much panic in a long time. *That thing’s a Midgardsormr!*

“A Midgardsormr? You sure?”

I-I think it’s still growing.

“So this is a grub?”

I could never have imagined the hundred-meter-long Sea Worm started life as this tiny monster. *Th-there’s another one over there.*

“Where?”

It’s that long thing.

“This is one, too?”

Fran held the long ropelike creature in her free hand. The creature

retained the red-and-black exterior of its smaller brethren, but it was much longer. The first specimen was only as big as the palm of Fran's hand, while this second was over a meter long.

"So this turns into this?"

Probably... Urgh, those ridges are gross.

The juvenile Sormr wasn't perfectly smooth. Its tubular body was ridged at regular intervals.

Jerome approached Fran as she inspected the future A-Threat. "That's a young Midgardsormr!"

"Hm."

The captain's face grew grim. "A few months old by the size of it... Its parent might still be around."

"I thought you said only Krakens lived here."

"For the most part, yeah. We've had sightings of Midgardsormr here, too. Only once every few years, fortunately."

"I fought a Midgardsormr once."

"Recently?"

"Hm. When I was on the boat to Bulbola."

"Are you serious? We can't let our guard down, then..."

"What do we do in case of an attack?"

"Midgardsormr are very sensitive to smell. We'll put out a chum bucket to throw it off our scent."

The sailors had ways of dealing with Midgardsormr since they were liable to run into one on their voyages. Jerome seemed well acquainted with the creatures, so we asked for some further clarification.

"This thing grows up into this thing?"

"Yeah, though not the way you think. It doesn't technically get longer by itself."

"How do they do it then?"

"These small ones attach to one another to grow bigger. See these ridges on the bigger one?"

"Yeah. Gross."

“That’s where they conjoin. Sormr grubs latch on to the butts of other Sormr and so forth. They grow longer and longer until they fuse to become a single Midgardsormr.”

While strange, this wasn’t completely unheard of on Earth. I thought I’d heard of some jellyfish or microbe that grew in a similar fashion... Jerome cleared up the question of multiple hearts in one Sormr, though. Although the giant worm looked like a single creature, it actually breathed as a colony. No wonder Death Gaze’s Instant Death couldn’t kill it.

“What do I do with this?”

“We’ll gather up and dispose of these pests. Put them in a separate batch if you happen to find any more.”

“Got it.”

We proceeded to look for Sea Worms. Since we had Identify and Mana Sense, finding Sormrs in a mountain of fish was easy. There weren’t any dangerous monsters among the catch, and the sorting went swimmingly. I couldn’t wait to see what the cook had in mind.

The only problem was Fran’s smelly hands. If she didn’t clean them properly, the stench would linger. I didn’t mind the smell, but I didn’t know what I would do if people started calling her stinky.

Teacher.

What’s up?

I want a bath. Fran sniffed her hands and recoiled. Even she was turned off by the fishy smell and the slime.

I’m not sure if there’s a bath on this ship...but we can make it work.

We could produce our own hot water with magic. No need to go through the *Algieba*’s reserves.

But what about the bathtub?

We couldn’t use Earth Magic, since there wasn’t enough earth to work with. A wooden barrel would be the next best thing, but was there anything else we could use? A steel barrel immediately came to mind, but I doubted the ship had any that weren’t in use. We could use a large cooking pot—Fran was certainly small enough.

But then we have to think about hygiene...

Even with Cleansing Magic, the idea of cooking with a pot that

had been used as a bathtub was off-putting. Was there anything we could do?

“Hmmm.”

“What’s on your mind, Fran?”

We might as well ask Jerome. Maybe there was a big wooden barrel that lay forgotten somewhere.

But the captain told us that the *Algieba* was already equipped with a bath. I kept forgetting that this fantasy world functioned with magic and manatech. What sounded like a luxury was actually standard fare, even for medium-size vessels.

No one had used the tub in the last few days as sailors mostly didn’t go in for bathing. It was hard to imagine these rough and rowdy men relaxing in a bathtub, and they also had the convenient excuse of wanting to keep costs down. However, in the event of long voyages, health and hygiene became priorities, and the men would be forced to bathe. So far, they had yet to take their first dip. Jerome told us that we were free to use the bath, as long as we brought our own water. We left quickly to find it.

“It’s big.”

Big enough to cause a dent in the water bill.

The baths were large enough for several dozen sailors. There was the bath proper, along with several places to wash up. While Fran and I could conjure up hot water with little difficulty, the manatech took quite a bit of time and resources to prepare.

You do the water and I’ll heat it up.

“Hm!”

“Woof woof!”

Okay, Jet, come on out.

The captain allowed us to wash our direwolf as long as we promised to clean up afterward. Fran and Jet monopolized the large bath, feeling like royalty. We returned to our room completely relaxed.

Fran informed Mordred and the first mate that she was done so that they could use the bath. The first mate was quite pleased at being allowed to bathe and cheerfully asked her to do the same thing again tomorrow. Fran was taken aback at his dripping wet figure. Have you

ever seen a wet goat? It was just like that.

We didn't mind—preparing the bath cost us next to nothing and it meant that Fran could bathe daily. The fact that the first mate now owed us was a nice bonus. Of course, I drained the tub and replaced the water after Fran. I'd be in the depths of a scrap heap before I let some guy use the same water as her!

Chapter 4: Raid, Repel, Raid

THE NEXT DAY.

Nothing's biting.

"Hm."

We were fishing from the top deck. Fran sat on the railing, in a good mood despite the lack of a catch. Relaxation was our primary motivation today, so we didn't mind that the fish were slow to come. She periodically gave her rod a tug, taking donuts and biscuits out of Pocket Dimension.

The sailors were anxious about how she was perched, and warned her again and again.

"Please get off the railing, miss!"

But after she demonstrated her expertise with Air Hop, they finally let her alone. Jerome just laughed it all off.

"There's no end to the ocean."

Yeah.

The horizon seemed endless, its stillness broken only by the occasional flying fish and dolphins. Eventually, Fran got tired of sitting on the rail and took out a deck chair to laze in. Our guard duty was feeling more like an all-expenses-paid cruise. The other adventurers came up for their rounds, but they left her alone. Honestly, I thought it was because Mordred chose not to comment on her actions, or lack thereof. He was confident that Fran was still on the lookout for hostiles, despite looking like she was slacking off. If this continued, the whole contract might end up being little more than a comfortable cruise.

Maybe that was what triggered what happened next. Around the afternoon, the stillness of the ship was finally broken. Alarm bells sounded four times. That meant pirates were inbound.

Pirates!

"Let's go!"

Fran grabbed me and rushed out of her room. The crew was

getting into battle positions when she arrived on the top deck. Mordred and the others were already on the scene, and they all looked southbound.

“They’re coming in hot.”

“Where are the pirates?”

“Over there.” Mordred pointed to a shape on the waters.

It was still too far away, and I couldn’t make out what it was. Honestly, I didn’t know how they figured out it was a pirate ship.

“That’s a ship?”

“No doubt about it! I can see their flag from here!” Jerome declared.

His eagle eyes amazed me until I turned to him and saw him looking through a telescope. That made more sense.

“Can we outrun them?”

“Doubt it. Those small vessels can move fast, and the winds aren’t in our favor. We should make contact in about an hour.”

“So we’ll fight.”

“Count on it. They won’t let us leave without one.”

That small ship was going to take on this veritable dreadnought? Even if they managed to come within boarding range, I still didn’t see how they were going to scale the *Algieba*’s hull. I was sure the pirates must’ve had a plan.

“That boat’s equipped with a naval ram. They’re going to punch a hole in our side and board from there.”

A battering ram attached to the bow of the ship. Pirates used it mainly as a boarding method. Their naval ram was hollowed out, so once it had punched through, the pirates were free to board. The bigger the target, the better it worked. A pirate fleet would surround a ship and ram into it to stop it in its tracks before boarding like ants. It was much safer and more effective than conventional rope ladders.

“So what’s the plan?”

“We’ll try to blow them out of the water first with spells and cannons.”

Sinking ships was the basic form of naval combat. The closer the

pirates got, the more likely they would be to put a hole in our ship. Still, I thought this was a good opportunity to capture the pirates and turn them in for bounty. Not to mention raid their ships.

Jerome shook his head. "That's a pain in the ass."

"That's it?"

"Think about it. We have to escort said pirates all the way to port and throw them in a prison where they'll be well looked after. As for their ship, I would have to put some of my crew on there to take it home."

But pirates had treasure, which was presumably on their ship.

Again, Jerome corrected us. "The fact that they're even bothering to attack us is proof that they haven't dug up anything of value yet."

"I see."

Fair enough. There was no reason for them to load up on treasure when they had just left port.

"If we were dealing with a large ship, then maybe it'd be worth the trouble. The propulsion systems they have installed are worth a lot of money." Jerome was dead serious. The prospect of a merchant vessel plundering a pirate ship was terrifying. "Now, the propulsion system on that little dinghy isn't worth jack squat. If only it was a bit bigger. Shame."

"So we're going to blow them up?"

"They'd cause more trouble if we didn't." Jerome didn't recognize the pirates' flag. "I know most of the fleets that operate in this region."

The pirates coming to attack us were no two-bit operation. They had a big enough armada to sink a large ship.

"Probably newcomers from either the north or south."

This route was dotted with many small islands ideal for making port, along with a healthy traffic of merchant vessels. No wonder this region was highly contested among the pirates.

"Risky business even for them. All the merchant vessels using this route know what they're getting into." Jerome smiled fearlessly.

When he put it that way, it was much riskier for the pirates than for the merchants. The spats over territory forced the pirates to form a federation as a method of survival. These newcomers had probably

kicked out the previous federation ruling the route and were on their way to becoming the next king of the hill.

“Letting those five recon ships go would reveal our location and armaments. We need to take them out before they can make their report.”

“I see.”

But what did that mean for us? Could we join the fight? It was a good thing we had a veteran adventurer standing by.

“What now, Mordred?”

“We’ll start with a volley of cannon fire. If they come closer, we’ll start attacking with spells. All spellcasting adventurers will attack from the top deck.”

Cannons could reach farther, but if we could hit them, wouldn’t they be able to hit us? We asked Jerome and Mordred about the possibility of casualties, but to them it was expected. Fortunately, we had another solution.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Leave this one to me.”

“What do you have in mind?” Jerome asked.

“Hm. I’ll go take them out.”

“Kid, I appreciate the gusto, but can you really do it?”

“Yeah.”

“I won’t allow anything reckless. We’ve got a long voyage ahead of us, and we still need the Black Lightning Princess on board.” Jerome turned to Mordred for help. He couldn’t tell whether Fran was kidding.

The other man gave him a reassuring nod. “You know how A-Ranks aren’t strictly human? Well, anyone who can beat an A-Rank is pretty much in the same category. I say go for it.”

I looked at Mordred to see if he was being sarcastic, but there was no trace of flippancy on his face. He thought highly of Fran’s abilities. I suppose monstrosity was a word of praise in adventuring circles.

Captain Jerome accepted his counsel. “Alright then. You’re free to do what you want as long as you don’t damage the ship.”

“I won’t. I’ll be off then.”

“Off?” Jerome tilted his head in confusion—a gesture that didn’t make the middle-aged man look any cuter. He probably thought Fran was going to blow them out of the water with a big spell, or draw their attention and destroy them.

“Off to send them to the bottom of the ocean. Jet.”

“Woof!”

“Whoa! Was that wolf always this big?!” Jerome and his crew were startled at Jet’s actual size.

Even Mordred took a step back. “Well, well...I’m not sure if I can beat that...”

Jet crouched to let Fran climb onto his back.

“Go.”

“Bark!”

“I-It’s flying?”

“The wolf is flying...!”

“What the hell, that’s crazy!”

The *Algieba*’s crew sent us off with cries of astonishment.

Let’s go higher.

Cannonballs had a long effective range, but even they were bound by the law of gravity.

“Got it.”

“Woof!”

Jet cut through the sky and moved above the pirate ship. We stopped there for a while and observed the pirates. They were looking up at Fran in shock, but they soon returned to their senses and readied their arrows. They were aiming for Jet, but our direwolf dodged easily. We now knew for sure that these were hostiles.

Let’s get in there!

“Hm!”

We were up against a small fleet of pirates, but the fact remained that their ships were quite small. Barraging them with spells from this height would be easy enough, but this was our chance to experiment.

Let's try to figure some stuff out.

“Like what?”

Like the best way to sink a ship. There's five of them down there, so let's use a different method to dispose of each one.

Fortunately, I didn't feel any strong auras from below. There was no way for these pirates to retaliate, making them the perfect test subjects.

We'll try out some thunder spells to start.

“Alright.”

The last time we were faced with pirates, the best we could do was drop a boulder on their ship. But we had grown stronger since then.

“Kanna Kamuy?”

No, that would be overkill. It might wipe out all five ships at once.

That spell was our ace in the hole. It took up so much of our energy that we couldn't cast it over and over. The five-boat fleet was grouped together closely, too, so there was a possibility of the lightning pillar electrocuting all of them at once. I wasn't willing to risk it.

“What about Thunder Bolt?”

That would be too weak.

Thunder Bolt was the enhanced version of Stun Bolt, which launched a paralyzing electric shock. While highly effective against biotics, I doubted if it could do much damage to a boat. Even if it could incapacitate the crew, the ship would still be afloat. Maybe a few bolts would be enough to sink it, but the fact remained that it was ineffective.

“Which one, then?”

I'll go first. There's something I want to try...

I concentrated the powerful spell. While not on the level of a Kanna Kamuy, this spell was still highly advanced. I used it against a couple of monsters when I first got it, so I was curious how a pirate ship would react to it.

Here goes!

“Hm!”

Ekato Keraunos!

A gigantic magic circle appeared in the sky, gathering countless bolts of lightning together. Once charged, it came down on the ship, exploding it to splinters. Not even the mast was left behind, just tiny wooden chips floating on the water.

Hmm...maybe that was still overkill.

Ekato Keraunos was a Level 9 thunder spell. It cast a hundred bolts of lightning over a given area, although you could focus all of them into one spot once you were used to it. Although its power was only a tenth of Kanna Kamuy, it was more than enough to obliterate a small naval vessel.

The pirates stopped what they were doing as soon as they saw us destroy the first ship. Their blood ran cold. Many of them thought it was a freak accident—that there was no way Fran was the immediate cause of such destruction. From their perspective, it looked like one of their ships was the victim of an act of the gods.

“My turn.”

Go for it.

“Hm.”

The pirates were about to learn that Fran was indeed the source of their misfortune.

“Thor’s Hammer!”

Fran formed a medium-size magic circle on top of the next boat. The circle was ten meters in diameter, much smaller than the one I’d summoned for Ekato Keraunos. This was the Level 8 thunder spell that Phelms had managed to disperse during the fighting tournament.

BOOOOM!

With an atmosphere-splitting rumble, a powerful bolt of lightning crashed down on the ship. The hull split in two, and the debris burnt to ashes. As its name suggested, the effect was much like the hammer of an angry thunder god. The split ship charred and smoked before sinking to the seabed.

That worked great.

“Hm.”

Thor’s Hammer was perfect for this occasion. It sank the ship without being overkill, which was exactly what I was looking for. The

sight of the sinking ship reminded me of how perfectly Phelms had rendered it ineffective. High-rank adventurers really were monsters.

Let's go lower this time.

"What will we do?"

Put a hole in one of them, it's the basic way of sinking an enemy ship.

"Really?"

Yep. So here's what we'll do.

I cast Flare Explode, a Level 4 flame spell, under the surface of the sea.

KABOOOM!

Well, that didn't go as expected.

"You made a hole in it, though."

No, I didn't go low enough. That hole won't make it sink.

The spell didn't work as it should underwater. Then again, I guessed Flame Magic and water were never meant to go together.

"What now?"

Let me try something out.

I cast another Flare Explode, but this time I used a wind spell to wrap the fireball in air and prevent it from coming into direct contact with the water. A loud explosion soon followed, and as expected, a hole appeared in the bottom of the ship. I thought I was on to something with underwater flame spells, but it didn't look like it was going to work out. Odd, because I remembered watching a documentary in my past life about how explosions were far more potent underwater... Perhaps magic didn't follow conventional physics.

I'd targeted the ship's propulsion system, so it should be toast by now. While it wasn't sinking, it could no longer move, and it was only a matter of time before it went down. The problem with this method was that it allowed the crew time to run away.

I'll fire a couple more.

"Sure."

I launched five more Flare Explodes to obliterate the hull. The more holes in a ship, the faster it sank. Soon, ship number three was no more. Flare Explode wasn't the most effective method—we had to get

close to the enemy and it took too much time. It was nearly impossible to defend against, but Thor's Hammer was definitely faster.

Next.

"What's the plan now?"

Let's try Telekinetic Catapult. I haven't gone all out in a while.

"Sure."

I focused my energy into Telekinesis and wrapped myself in multiple Elemental Blades. This full-power Telekinetic Catapult was further boosted with Fran's Wind Magic. I used as much mana as I could, ignoring the damage I was taking to my blade. I was curious to see how much havoc I could wreak when it was fully charged.

"Ready?"

Ready! Let it rock!

"Haaaa!"

Fran cast her wind spell and threw me with supersonic speed. I used Telekinesis to accelerate even further. I hadn't moved so fast in a long time!

Yahoo!

I sped toward the pirate ship with the trajectory of a falling star. I went through one of the masts, causing it to crumple, then punched a hole through the bases of the other masts. I charged on through the pirate ship, piercing every pillar and wall that stood in my way.

Raaaargh!

Eventually I shot out the other side, leaving behind a sizable exit wound. I could only see the damage I had done in hindsight. I only remembered being thrown by Fran and breaking through a mast. Next thing I knew I was underwater.

I returned to Fran's side, and we surveyed the damage. There was a large hole through the center of the ship and down into the blue waters below. I'd done a lot more damage than I'd thought. Still, overcharging Elemental Blades had cost durability, and it was going to take a lot of mana to recover.

"Last one. What's the plan?"

They're getting away, so we should sink them as soon as possible...

What else could we use? Maybe a strong gust of wind from the opposite direction. We could capsize it if all went well.

But Fran had another idea. “Can I take this one?”

Sure. What do you have in mind?

“You’ll have to help me.”

Oh. Well, alright, then!

“So—”

Fran’s plan was quite bewildering. She asked me to use Transmogrify to make myself as big as possible.

I’ve tried shield and string forms once...

But it never occurred to me to make myself bigger. I strained, focusing my energy to increase my size. I enlarged my blade and guard, since Fran still needed to be able to hold on to my hilt. I probably overdid it. I was now past the size of a conventional horse-cutter. At a length of ten meters, I looked like those giant sword robots wielded in mech games. Was I a ship-cutter, then? No, ship-slayer was more like it. I’ve always felt that “slayer” had a better ring to it.

Big enough for you?

“Hm. Perfect. Let’s go.”

Go for it! I can’t hold this form for long!

“No problem!”

As we fell from the sky, Fran used Increased Weight, Sword Art, and Elemental Blade to prepare a gigantic Pressurized Quickdraw. There was a loud crack of air.

“Haaa!”

Come on!

I have to admit that the size increase got to my head. In that moment, it felt like size mattered. That size was everything. The pirates couldn’t believe their eyes as a gigantic sword came swinging down on them from the sky. The assault sounded like a joke, but it would destroy their sanity like a nightmare.

Fran split the final boat in two. Wood splintered in all directions and was consumed by the fires of Elemental Blade. The two halves of the destroyed ship would soon reunite on the seabed.

We can use this.

“Felt good, at least.”

Thor’s Hammer and Ship-Slayer were the easiest methods of boat destruction so far—Thor’s Hammer for lone ships and Ship-Slayer for fleets.

Let’s head back.

“Hm.”

We returned to the *Algieba*, leaving the pirates to sleep with the fishes. Jerome rushed to Fran like he was going to jump her. He grabbed her hands with one of his and excitedly shook them up and down.

“Now that’s what I wanted to see, Black Lightning Princess!”

Jerome beamed as he heaped praise on her. He was really glad that his ship and crew had escaped unscathed. The sailors welcomed her back with roaring applause. No one showed sympathy for the sunken pirates. In this world, it was kill or be killed.

The adventurers’ mood was a little more subtle. While not terrified, they were quiet with awe. Combat prowess was the criterion of judgment for adventurers, and Fran had just showcased an excessive amount of strength. Everyone could only gape with admiration.

Mordred broke the silence with a wry smirk. “That was insane... I’ve never seen such blatant rank fraud in my life.”

It sounded like a backhanded compliment, but he was probably just being honest in his observation. Fran’s abilities were far above even the strongest C-Rank. The sailors calmed down after a while and fell into formation at Jerome’s command.

“Come on, you lot! Let’s get out of this patch of water!”

“Aye aye, Captain!”

“That was quite a show you gave them.”

The explosive fight had summoned hungry underwater monsters, attracted by both noise and diced-up pirate.

“I think I overdid it.”

“You just took out five boats without so much a scratch! That’s well worth the risk!”

“I do hope you will be more measured next time.”

Unlike his laughing captain, First Mate Buffet was calm and collected. He also had a point. If there was a next time, then we would be more careful.

“I’ll be heading back now.”

“We’re counting on you if we spot more pirates!”

“You got it.”

“Ga ha ha! I’m loving this kid!”

Fran said goodbye and made her way to her room, but she was stopped by three figures who appeared before her.

“W-we have a favor to ask you!”

“Please make us your students!”

Miguel, Riddick, and Naria. The three rookie adventurers fell on their faces.

“We saw that entire fight.”

“We want to get stronger. Way stronger!”

“So please take us as your students!”

The three rookies were genuine in their request, but there was no way Fran could take them on. They were deadweight, and even if they weren’t, Fran’s personality made teaching unlikely. However, she gave it some thought.

“My students?”

“Yes!”

“Please!”

“We’ll do everything you say!”

The three banged their foreheads on the deck to emphasize their point. They waited for Fran’s answer, giving the passing crew members something amusing to look at.

“Hmm...”

Are you actually going to take them in?

No. But it’ll be funny.

Sure, but that doesn’t mean we can take them with us on our trip.

They would only slow us down, and there was the chance that they might learn about my existence.

I know.

Just needed to make that clear...so what's on your mind?

I'll take them for as long as we're on the ship.

I guessed that could work. We were in separate rooms, so they probably wouldn't learn our secret. *As long as you're willing...can you even teach?*

Who cares? It'll be funny.

So that was her main reason.

You need to be upfront and tell them you have no teaching experience. If they're okay with that, then you can take them in.

"Hm. You can be my students as long as we're on the ship."

"R-really?"

"But I've never taught anyone before. If you're okay with that, you can be my students."

"Sounds good to us!"

"Alright. I have much to teach you."

"Thank you so much!"

The three rookies bowed, eliciting applause. The crew was apparently invested in our little drama. The rookies deserved to be congratulated, too, since they were willing to swallow their pride and ask a young yet powerful adventurer for help.

"We await your instructions, Teacher!" Riddick declared with natural excitement.

It got him a cold glare from Fran. *You're scaring the guy for being polite now, come on.*

"You can't call me that."

"Huh? Why not?"

"You just can't. I am not worthy of it."

I was touched at the honor she paid me, but "Teacher" was not the greatest title in the world. I didn't stop her, of course. If they started calling her that, it would only cause confusion.

“Anything but Teacher.”

“A-alright.”

“Figure something out.”

“V-very well.”

The rookies responded to Fran’s grim pressure with a slow nod. They whispered among themselves before presenting Fran with their solution.

“Wh-what about ‘Master’?”

“Master?”

“Y-yes. Will that be okay?”

“Hm. I am Master.”

Fran nodded, clearly liking the ring of it. She repeated, “I am Master,” to herself several times.

“We’ll begin your training immediately,” she said.

“Yes, Master!”

Fran was quite enthusiastic about the whole business. She must quite like her new title. Now, what would she have them do? I wasn’t going to give any feedback. The rookies only had themselves to blame if Fran gave them an outrageous training schedule. I was only here to make sure Fran enjoyed herself.

“First up.”

“Yes?”

“Shadow practice?”

“Shadow practice? Right away!”

Despite the question Fran had put at the end, shadow practice was a good place to start. Maybe she had a knack for teaching? But of course she did—Fran was multitalented!

Miguel and Riddick wasted no time readying their weapons. Miguel swung his greatsword, and Riddick stabbed his spear. Naria was the only one left standing awkwardly still. Her bow was quite difficult to practice without loading. Still, Fran insisted she do the same.

“Sorry, Master, but I happen to be an archer.”

“You only have your bow with you?”

“Pretty much.”

“That won’t do. An enemy would kill you at melee range.”

“So I should pick up some close-quarter weapon?”

“Hm. A dagger will do. Focus on receiving and deflecting rather than attacking. You can even throw it if you need to.”

I was quite surprised at Fran’s instruction. She might actually have a knack for this teaching stuff.

“Understood.”

“You probably won’t get good at it any time soon, but start today.”

“Yes, Master!”

Fran took a rusty dagger out of Pocket Dimension and gave it to Naria. I forgot that we still had one of those. It’d probably belonged to a goblin we killed. “Here.”

“For me?”

“Hm. It’s too rusty to fight with, but you can use it for practice.”

“Thank you very much.”

Fran nodded with approval as Naria took to her training. Although she still hadn’t taught them anything.

“So...do we just keep going?”

“Hm.”

Which was a solid plan of action, really. Shadow practice was effective because you could do it every day. Also, considering that skills leveled up the more you used them, shadow practice was probably a lot more effective than its Terran counterpart.

Fran kept a close eye on her pupils. I was looking forward to seeing how they fared at the end of this voyage.

The next morning, the trainees’ day began early in a corner of the deck. That was where Master Fran held her Basics in Battle for Adventurers.

The three were wide awake, a far cry from their lazy posture back in Bulbola. They hadn't necessarily had a change of heart—Fran's victory was just the wake-up call they needed. To their credit, maybe they weren't that lazy, after all. In any case, the rookies were certainly more organized now—maybe because Fran had already intimidated them, saying, "Can't you even fall in line, you maggots?"

She'd asked me for advice on training drills the night before and I had inadvertently told her about the marine corps...a regiment she took immediate interest in. *Sorry for making your life tougher, you guys.*

I quickly told her to use a different tack. I couldn't bear the rookies looking scared for their lives. Fran complied. Really, she just wanted a framework to base her curriculum on.

"First, you stretch."

"St-stretch?"

"It must be a powerful training method!"

"Maybe it'll unlock our mana channels..."

The trainees locked on to the idea. I guessed stretching was unheard of in this world. While they did loosen up before a physical activity, they had never heard of an activity solely dedicated to it. When we'd first met, I had to tell Fran how to stretch. Now, it was her turn to pass it on.

"It warms you up before exercising."

"I see. And that's a good thing?"

"Hm."

"Very interesting. So how is that a good thing?"

"Warming up your body just makes you better," Fran said.

"I'm sorry, but better how? Can you give us any examples?"

"Hm? You're just better."

I told her the benefits of warming up when we met, but Fran had already forgotten. She knew that it allowed you to move and feel better during training, and that was what mattered. Her trainees followed her cue. I thought they would've gotten tired of Fran's vague instructions, but they did as they were told.

"Uhh...is this really necessary?"

“Of course it is, idiot! Do I need to remind you who’s teaching us?!”

“R-right.”

“We’re probably not feeling the effects because of our low rank.”

“Y-yeah. If the Black Lightning Princess does it, it must be powerful!”

“Yes. I’m sure it’ll pay off at some point.”

“That’s right! Maybe our master is so strong thanks to this stretching thing!”

“I see! So this training routine has hidden effects that we can’t feel yet!”

“I’m sure of it!”

“Now I’m pumped!”

No, it really was nothing special. At most, stretching prevented you from getting injured. I guess you could argue that allowed you to train harder, but still.

“Teacher taught me this stretching.”

“Teacher? Is that your master?”

“Hm.”

“What’s he like?”

“Teacher is the world’s best teacher. I got all my powers from him.”

“Wow! He must be an amazing warrior!”

“He’s the best ever.”

“And if that great warrior came up with stretching—”

“Then it must have powerful effects!”

“Now I’m *really* pumped!”

The three trainees stretched enthusiastically, which sort of defeated the purpose. Fran corrected their form and told them to take it slowly. The trainees received her advice with almost euphoric adoration. For Fran to stoop so low and give them instruction was an action worthy of deep respect. Their enthusiasm soon disappeared after Fran told them about the next item on the menu.

“Now, we spar.”

“What?”

“Seriously?”

“Wh-who are we sparring with?”

The memory of their first sparring session was still painfully fresh in their minds. They hoped that they wouldn't have to go up against their master. Maybe she would make them fight each other.

Fran wasted no time in dashing their hopes. “Hm. You'll all go one-on-one with me.”

“Very well...”

“You can go first, Naria”

“Excuse me, I thought you were the leader!”

“I am also a gentleman who believes in ladies first.”

“Way to be chivalrous, Riddick!”

As the three bickered over who would be first on the chopping block, Fran pointed to Miguel and settled the issue. “Greatsword. You first.”

“S-seriously?”

“Hurry up.”

“Yes, Master!”

“Show her what you're made of, big guy.”

“And try not to die.”

“Y-you bastards are going next, don't forget that!” Miguel stepped forward with despair written all over his face.

“Come at me.”

“Alright! Raaargh!”

Miguel slashed his greatsword down. He didn't hesitate, knowing the difference in their strength. His swing was powerful enough to split an ordinary man clean in two. He held nothing back, but Fran saw through his attack. It was easy to dodge, and even easier to block.

The crew watching the spectacle were horrified, of course. To them, it looked like the guy with the greatsword was trying to chop the little girl in half. Not all of them knew the extent of Fran's abilities yet.

The crew were already bewildered at adults receiving instruction from a little girl, and now they gasped in horror. Fortunately, the horror they imagined never happened.

“Your stroke is too long.”

Fran dodged by a hair's breadth, her bangs fluttering in Miguel's missed swing. She actually had a lot of time to evade. Even if Miguel had managed to change trajectory midswing, she would still have had time to dodge. That was the difference in their strength.

“Yaah!”

“Having a strong first attack is important, but it won't do you any good if you miss.”

“Dammit!”

“Use shorter strokes.”

“Haaa!”

“Your footwork needs work, too.”

“Urgh!”

Fran dodged Miguel's attacks and made no attempt to retaliate. She struck him from time to time to show him his weak points. The sailors were shocked, but Miguel was quite pleased that Fran instructed him so seriously. The match carried on for another ten minutes before Miguel collapsed with exhaustion.

“Hm. Your last few moves were alright.”

“Th-thank you, Master!”

“Lancer, you're up next.”

“Yes, Master!”

Another fierce sparring match began, with Riddick as her opponent. Unlike Miguel, Riddick was more precise and aimed specifically for his opponent's weak points. But, as methodical as his stabs were, they were too clean. Fran saw right through them.

“Your attacks are too predictable.”

“Kuh!”

“I can see all your moves. Play a bit more.”

“Haaa!”

“That was good, if a bit slow.”

Fran continued to dodge Riddick’s attacks, touching parts of his body that he left open. She wanted to show that he would’ve been killed ten times over in a real fight. Eventually, Fran drained the lancer of his stamina, and he fell to the floor.

Finally, we had Naria. The archer wasn’t going to spar with her bow; rather she would make an attempt with her newly acquired dagger skills. It wasn’t safe to spar with a bow and arrow on the wide-open deck. The crew could get caught in the crossfire. And anyway, Fran had more experience with bladed weapons.

She dodged Naria’s attacks easily, but she was more on the offensive this time. She wanted to teach the archer how to defend at close range.

“Focus on deflecting rather than attacking.”

“Alright!”

“If you can’t block, then dodge.”

“Ow!”

“You’re only using the dagger to buy time.”

Naria went down faster than Miguel and Riddick. There was no shame in it—she was using an unfamiliar weapon, and Fran was quite relentless. The three of them sat on deck, panting from exhaustion.

Fran looked satisfied. “Archer, keep training with the dagger.”

“Okay!”

“Greatsword, Lancer, you need to clean up your footwork.”

The three rookies nodded. They’d learned a lot from a single sparring match. I also noticed something else about them.

“Archer, you can start practicing with your bow again if you want.”

Greatsword, Lancer, and Archer. I was quite sure that Fran had forgotten their names. Well, that was how she treated anyone who didn’t interest her. I wondered if Fran would remember their names by the end of the voyage.

The next day, Fran continued to instruct her temporary trainees. Stretching, beltwork, shadow practice, then sparring. They were cooling down when the alarm bells rang. Four times. We had more pirates on our tail.

“M-Master, let’s go!”

“Dammit! Pirates again? I thought they stayed away from the Kraken’s Nest!”

“We might be up against an armada with the manatech to ward off Krakens.”

“Seriously?! That’s awful!”

“Calm down! You saw how Master took on five pirate ships by herself.”

“Y-you’re right.”

Fran told her pupils to wait and headed to the bow of the ship. She found Jerome peeking through his telescope. “How many?”

“Fran, glad you could make it. Twelve. There’s a big one among them, too.”

Twelve? That was quite a lot.

“They have the same flag as the five boats you sank yesterday.”

“So they’re related?”

“Definitely. Looks like they’re running this territory.”

“And this is the main fleet?”

“By the looks of it, yeah...” Jerome said with more than a hint of dissatisfaction.

“Something about them, though... It’s weird.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t quite place it, but...there’s something odd about them!”

“Let me see.”

“Use this.”

“Hm. Thanks.” Fran took the telescope and looked through it. The sight of the meathead and the maiden sharing a telescope would’ve been quite funny if the situation was less serious.

Spot anything weird, Fran?

“Hmm...that’s odd?”

Okay...but I asked you first.

Fran tilted her head, sharing Jerome’s confusion. “Oh...”

“Notice something?”

“I think I’ve seen that ship before.”

What? My skills allowed me to see farther than the human eye, but not as far as a telescope. *Wh-what? Where?*

“Wh-what? Where?!”

I synced up with Jerome there for a second.

“It looks a lot like Miriam’s ship.”

“Miriam?”

“Hm. A friend of mine.”

Miriam was the princess of Seedrun. She liked Fran enough to send her all the way to Bulbola after the revolution. During that trip, Fran spent a lot of time looking at Miriam’s Sea Dragon, Aqouis. She was the only captain the creature would acknowledge. Traditionally, the name of the Sea Dragon was also the name of the vessel it pulled.

“Who’s Miri—hm?!” Jerome raised his voice. The captain had spotted something. “Th-that’s...!”

“What is it?” Fran asked, taking the telescope again.

“That flag...!” The captain seemed to have remembered something.

Fran, what about the flag?

Hm? There’s another flag on top of the one with the skull and crossbones.

And it’s not a pirate flag?

It’s got a weird mark on it. Looks like a dragon.

That roused my memories.

“Hang on...” Jerome muttered. “You said Miriam, just now?”

“Hm.”

“There’s a general in Seedrun by the name of Miriam...”

“That’s the one. She’s a princess of Seedrun.”

“By the gods! And you say you’ve seen a similar vessel? Are those Seedrunian ships on our tail? But why would they fly pirate flags...” Jerome said, stricken with fear.

Seedrun was the name of the archipelago as well as the kingdom that lay to the north of these waters. The kingdom was founded when a powerful federation of pirates rallied others under their flag. These roguish origins made for an especially rowdy people, even to this day. Everyone in Seedrun was trained in combat, even its little girls, and the kingdom was notorious for its fighters. Suffice it to say, they were also the world’s greatest naval power. Even without their iconic Sea Dragons, the navy was a force to be reckoned with.

I remembered the day of the Seedrun uprising—how its citizens rioted and overthrew the previous tyrant. You could imagine how much stronger the marines and veterans were.

Jerome shook his head at the grim prospect of going to war with Seedrun. “Could it be a fake...? No, doesn’t look like it.”

“How can you tell?”

I could imagine pirates using the Seedrunian flag as a bluff, but the captain seemed to have spotted something.

“Look at the bow of their ship.”

“The bow?”

What do you see, Fran?

“Hmm...chains?”

“At the end of those chains is a Sea Dragon. That’s unmistakable.”

Various attempts had been made to tame the monsters for naval purposes, but no one had succeeded since the first king of Seedrun.

“Only four Sea Dragon vessels exist, but those are enough to put fear into the hearts of pirate captains everywhere.”

The speed and power of these vessels was on another level, and they were easily the world’s most powerful battleships. A ship as big as the one Jerome had spotted was supposed to be slow, but with a Sea Dragon pulling it, it was as fast as a destroyer.

“But there’s no way that Miriam would be a pirate.”

I agreed with Fran. The administration was still a mess in Seedrun because of the revolution, and sending Sea Dragons out to international waters just didn't make sense. Miriam cared far too much for the new queen and her elder sister to leave in a time of unrest.

Still, I couldn't rule out Miriam's pirate activities because of how much respect she had for her ancestors. Even Sellimea, meek and mild, was cheerfully talkative about Seedrun's roguish roots.

"So someone else is driving that Sea Dragon... The flag's blue, that mean anything to you?"

"Blue? Miriam's was green."

Each Sea Dragon rode under a different flag.

"Wait, so it's not Miriam."

"Pretty sure. You know, I think blue's the color of the last king."

Suarez! The foolish recently dethroned dictator. I thought he was supposed to be behind bars. I was pretty sure that I did significant damage to his Sea Dragon when I went berserk, too... Well, no use thinking of that now. We needed to figure out a way to take care of this and fast.

"Dammit, what do we do! Run...? No, even at full speed we're too slow..."

"You won't fight?"

"Love to, can't. A single Sea Dragon can sink a hundred battleships."

"But we can't run."

"No...confound it all! Just my luck to run into such a monster!"

Escape was not in the cards.

"We're on bad terms with Seedrun as it is," Jerome said. "So I doubt they'd be satisfied with only thirty percent of our goods..."

Thirty percent was the going rate for pirates to let a ship go. But with a Sea Dragon in tow, a pirate had no need for negotiation. They could plunder and murder whole ships.

"The enemy is the flagship of the greatest naval force on the planet. We have no choice but to engage in melee combat...! They wouldn't fire their cannons at that kind of distance! We're counting on

you adventurers.”

Melee might be inevitable, but why not send Fran ahead like last time? Jerome had seen with his own eyes that she was capable of destroying ships.

“You’re up against a B-Threat Sea Dragon. Getting close is dangerous enough as it is.”

“Then we’ll destroy the ship from the sky.”

I doubted the Sea Dragon could shoot a flying target. We’d exploited this weakness yesterday, surely we could adapt it to face the Sea Dragon. While we didn’t know whether we could kill it, there was no way that the vessel was as tough as the monster pulling it.

Jerome shot down our plan. People had tried going after the ship and not the monster in the past. In fact, others had actually succeeded. “Problem is, they became fish food right after they won.”

A Sea Dragon without its rider was liable to go berserk and would seek vengeance on the one who had attacked it. You could argue with the creature, saying that you were targeting the ship the dragon was pulling, but the beast was unlikely to understand.

“Even if you managed to sink the vessel, you’d still have a furious dragon to contend with.”

“I see.”

So much for that plan. The safest course of action was to kill the dragon as well as the ship...but killing true dragons was difficult, and we had no experience.

We have time before they make contact. Let’s go ask Mordred.

“Hm.”

Fran asked one of the crew members to fetch the veteran, but Mordred was already on deck.

“Pirates again?”

“Yeah. Not your garden variety, though...”

“How strong?” Mordred frowned. He knew from Jerome’s gritted teeth that we were up against formidable foes.

“Very.”

“Even for the Black Lightning Princess? Now that’s worrying.”

“No use beating around the bush. The enemy’s a Sea Dragon class vessel.”

“What?” The older adventurer grimaced with fear. He knew full well what a Sea Dragon was capable of. “By the gods...” Mordred was at a loss for words, but he soon recovered. He knew that something had to be done. “Excuse me. I was a bit overwhelmed.”

That’s it? He looked totally calm to me. Mordred proved himself reliable time and again. We started discussing what to do.

“I believe you can handle the escort ships, Fran?”

“Hm. Got it covered.”

“Which leaves the Sea Dragon...”

We had to do something about the Seedrunian flagship if we wanted to get out of this. Unfortunately, Mordred had never fought a Sea Dragon, either.

“That lightning spell you used against the Dragon Hunter Phelms...that might be strong enough to kill a Sea Dragon. Can you still use that?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Now, what if it doesn’t work?”

Kanna Kamuy, imbued with Black Thunderfall, might be big enough to destroy the vessel as well as the monster. But if it didn’t, we would have a mad Sea Dragon to deal with. That encounter might be more trouble than it’s worth. Was there an attack we could use to dispose of the dragon while leaving the vessel intact?

Telekinetic Catapult?

You think so, too, huh?

Hm. That’s the only chance we’ve got.

Aiming for the Sea Dragon should be easy enough, since it was literally tied to the boat. We should be able to kill it by targeting its weak spot, the creature’s defense notwithstanding.

“What if I just focused fire on the Sea Dragon?”

“That’s one way to go about it...if you can.”

“Hm. I can.”

“I see. I guess we’re in your hands again, Fran... This is getting

sad.” Mordred sighed in frustration. He felt helpless, but this was a matter of effective range.

I could easily imagine his Steel Magic coming in handy when the inevitable cannonballs started coming. Now, was it actually okay for us to kill a Sea Dragon? Considering the beast belonged to Seedrun, I imagined an international controversy could easily break out.

“Is it really okay for me to sink that thing?”

“What do you mean?”

“That ship might’ve been stolen from Seedrun. Wouldn’t your governments start fighting if I sank it?”

Jerome and Mordred laughed at Fran’s innocent question.

“Don’t you worry about that. Even if it used to be part of the Seedrunian navy, it revoked all its rights when it started flying that pirate flag.”

“The pirate flag is a warning to nonmilitary vessels that they are armed and willing to kill. Attacking pirate ships under any circumstance is allowed.”

In that case, how should we handle this? Should we take on the Sea Dragon first or last? If we went after the escorts first, the Sea Dragon might catch up to the *Algieba*. On the other hand, the Sea Dragon was definitely the toughest...

Let’s go after the Sea Dragon first.

If we took it down, the other ships might scatter and flee. Battling anything that could sink a Sea Dragon was akin to suicide. Still, if we couldn’t outright kill the monster, we would then divert our attention to the smaller ships. That should slow the pirates down enough for us to get help.

The crew saw us off as we flew toward the Sea Dragon.

“Be careful out there!”

“We’re counting on you!”

“Don’t get yourself killed!”

“Hm! Come on, Jet.”

“Awoooo!”

The shouts of encouragement must’ve gotten to Jet because he

accelerated like a jet engine. It didn't take long before we were hovering over the pirate fleet, eleven smaller ships surrounding one big one. At the bow of the big ship was a pair of gigantic chains that went under the surface of the water.

Upon closer inspection, I could see that this vessel was exactly like the Sea Dragon Miriam commanded. They were replicas of each other, from the detail on the railings down to the decorations on the hull. This was a Sea Dragon, alright.

The pirates looked up, noticing the unidentified flying object that had closed in on them. They stared at us for a while before deciding that we were hostile. They drew their bows and took aim. Honestly, it was the sensible thing to do when you saw a direwolf flying in the sky.

Focus on dodging, Jet.

“Woof!”

Fran, provoke the Sea Dragon so that it pops its head out of the water.

“On it.”

Water resistance would greatly reduce the effectiveness of Telekinetic Catapult. I needed a clear shot.

“Jet, can you go lower?”

“Woof!”

Fran hung on and prepared a spell to get the beast's attention. Cannonballs and arrows flew toward us, but none of them came close to hitting Jet. There were spells mixed in with the hail of arrows, so there must have been mages on board. These were no ordinary pirates. Jet came over the Sea Dragon's head. Just before Fran fired her spell, the beast roared.

“KROOOO!”

The Sea Dragon lifted its head out of the water before we could prompt it. It had a long neck covered with thick scales. It still looked draconic, despite the fact that its wings had adapted into dorsal fins and its claws were now flippers. There was a layer of what looked like seawater over its body. Maybe it was using magic to stop itself from drying out.

The dragon looked similar to Miriam's Aquois, but it was still distinct. Its body was covered with wounds and it had a large scar on its

back which had yet to recover. You could still see the patch of pink flesh where the scales were just beginning to regrow.

The beast was watching us. Had it reacted to Fran's mana? That was certainly possible. That thing's senses were probably strong enough to sense Fran's spell before she could fire it.

"Krrrrr...!" The Sea Dragon snarled menacingly. It glared at us in rage. An appropriate response to people trying to kill it, but...

It seems a little...too pissed off.

It took an offensive posture. We could figure out why later. We had more important things to attend to at the moment.

He who dares wins!

"Hm!"

I was prepared for our next attack, and so was Fran.

"Haaaa!"

Woohoo!

She drew me back and used her entire bodyweight to chuck me at the dragon's face. I exploded with telekinesis, accelerating to speeds that even a Sea Dragon couldn't respond to. The beast's defenseless face was mere inches away.

Take this...! What?!

The loud sound of crashing waves came over me. The layer of water covering the Sea Dragon splattered, and the dragon was looking no worse for wear. The layer of seawater must have been a sort of fluid armor. The film acted as a buffer against physical attacks, while something like a mana barrier lay right underneath. This double-layered barrier was enough to disperse the force of a fully charged Telekinetic Catapult.

However, my attack wasn't entirely fruitless. A small nick was carved into its forehead. But it was little more than a scratch. We would have to change tactics if we wanted to get anywhere.

"Krrrrr!" The Sea Dragon roared with contempt.

Great, my trump card just made it mad! I would need a few thousand Telekinetic Catapults to kill this thing. Try this on for size! Lightning Blast!

Lightning Blast was a powerful but short-range thunder spell. I figured electricity would be super effective against a creature that lived underwater.

I'm too close to block now! Jolts of electricity leaped out of my blade, wrapped around the Sea Dragon's head, and lit it up like a Christmas tree.

"Krrrrroooooo!"

Curses! Water Magic?!

The Sea Dragon managed to retaliate, even while being electrocuted. Water rushed in and washed me away.

At least it got shocked by that one... Wait, it's perfectly fine?!

"Krrr!"

The Sea Dragon didn't look damaged at all. It focused its attention on me as I flew through the air. The thing was trying to bite me.

"Krrrooooo!"

Curses! I boosted myself out of there and returned to Fran's side.

"You okay?"

Barely!

Why was this thing so tough? Was it the dragonscales under a water barrier? I didn't think Telekinetic Catapult would be that useless. Thunder spells didn't work, either. I knew this thing was a B-Threat, but it was taking my hits like a tank...

The Sea Dragon didn't give us time to think. Massive amounts of mana gathered around it.





“KROOOOO!”

Ah, crap!

Basketball-size water balls floated around the Water Dragon. There were over thirty of them, each one carrying a significant lump of mana. Leave it to dragons to be just as dangerous with magic!

Dodge them, Jet!

“Grrr!”

Jet dodged the water balls surprisingly well, considering how randomly they moved. He hopped through the air, dispersing the spheres with shadow spells. This fantasy world was looking a lot like a bullet hell right now. Jet was doing great, but we weren’t out of the woods yet.

“You’re doing good, Jet.”

“...!”

Our direwolf didn’t even have time to reply.

What now? Do we run or keep attacking?

We had to do something if we wanted to keep on the offense. We needed to find the Sea Dragon’s weakness.

Then, Fran seemed to notice something. “I could see it from a distance.”

See what?

“The ship is supplying the Sea Dragon with mana.”

It is? I didn’t even catch that.

“The biggest rush of mana came when you attacked.”

That must be the secret behind the Sea Dragon’s mana barrier.

So the ship has manatech!

I should’ve anticipated it. There were a lot of powerful adventurers and mages in the world—we weren’t the only ones. That giant ship must be housing appropriately gigantic manatech. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was first-class stuff, too, considering it was once a flagship.

We’re in a pickle now... Destroying the ship will release the Sea Dragon, but we can’t beat the Sea Dragon without destroying the ship.

“What if we destroy the ship and then quickly kill the Sea Dragon?”

That’s still too risky.

What if the Sea Dragon went underwater instead of immediately lashing out? It would be very difficult to beat the beast in its home turf. What if it came back for revenge? We wouldn’t be able to anticipate an ambush from the depths of the sea.

“Can dragons take revenge?”

I don’t know, but it’s a B-Threat. There’s a chance that it’s as smart as Jet. That meant it was probably smart enough to feel resentment.

“I see. That’s bad.”

Our best chance is getting on board the ship...

Each Sea Dragon had a contract with a member of the Seedrunian royalty which allowed them to control it. This contractor was definitely on the vessel. If we captured them, the Sea Dragon would stop attacking. Alternatively, we could seek out the manatech and destroy it. Either way, we needed to board.

The Sea Dragon roared as if it was singing. “*Kroooroooooooooooo!*” The water balls surrounding it burst.

“Arf!”

“Urk!”

A tidal wave came at us from all directions, making it impossible for Jet to dodge. Fran and I rushed to set up barriers, but we noticed that it wasn’t doing much damage.

No! This isn’t meant to cause damage!

The water balls prevented us from moving. Massive amounts of water covered our protective barriers and held us in place. It was like we were in some kind of water cage.

Haaaaa!

“Yaaah!”

Fran and I hacked and cast spells at the water to disperse it, but it wasn’t going to be so easily dismissed. The water stopped in midair, before homing in on us again.

“Jet!”

“Woof!”

We had just enough time to get away. Fran and I teleported out of there while Jet shrank as small as possible to get through the cracks.

We made it, somehow.

“That was close.”

“Woof...”

We were inches away from getting bombarded.

No choice. We’ll have to go after the smaller ships!

“Okay! Jet!”

“Arf!”

Jet swooped up from under us and caught Fran neatly on his back.

Get in the shadow of the Sea Dragon’s ship! It won’t attack us there!
We could use the large vessel as cover.

“Come on, Teacher!”

We had to take out the surrounding ships before the Sea Dragon caught up to the *Algieba*!

“Jet, keep running at full speed.”

“Woof!”

I understood what Fran was asking. I used Transmogrify to magnify myself.

Good enough?

“Hm!”

Now that I was in Ship-Slayer form, Fran readied me. Jet let himself fall toward the water. Fran didn’t hesitate in swinging me, even as the surface of the water came closer to us.

“Haaaaa!”

Yaaargh!

The vertical momentum split the ship in two. It burst into flames and sank into the sea. Jet ran at the next vessel. Every ship he passed was soon split in two. We were still being pelted by arrows and spells, but the direwolf dodged them all. The spells came from a ship quite far away from us. I quickly dispatched it with Thor’s Hammer. We kept on sinking ships—Fran and Jet attacking the ones close to us, and me

dealing with the ones far away. In a few minutes, only one of the smaller ships was left.

“We got pretty much all of them.”

Good thing they were small.

“So why’d you leave one unharmed?”

Because we need the info. Jet, take us in! We could learn something about the captain of the Sea Dragon or its weakness from the pirates. We need to get the captain.

“Got it,” Fran said as Jet came closer. She looked at the pirates coldly from above.

“Gyaaaaa!”

“Th-the enemy’s here!”

“Where...! Oh gods!”

She landed on the deck and released a wave of Intimidate. The murderous pressure stopped them in their tracks. I used the chance to Identify them, but none seemed to have the information we needed.

Fran, that guy with the big spear and the mage next to him are in charge.

“So we don’t need the rest?”

Yeah. Just kill them all so they don’t get in the way.

“Hm. Got it.”

Fran rushed the pirates.

“Gyaaaaa!”

“Eaaaagh!”

The deck turned into their hell. The pirates panicked. Blood flowed freely from freshly cut limbs.

After killing about ten, Fran stopped. She unleashed another wave of Intimidate and spoke in a clear voice. “Abandon ship or die. Your choice.”

Close to half the crew immediately leaped overboard, although a good half of them resisted. I had to applaud them. They either had loyalty to each other, or were ready to face their doom.

“Alright. Die.”

Fran swung me again. I was now about five meters in length. A single swing eliminated a good twenty of them. The survivors groaned in agony as they crawled on the deck. Fran walked over to them. The pirates in charge were frozen in fear, but one thing worried me. The pirate with the spear had blood all over his face.

Fran?

Hm. I messed up.

She had inadvertently cut the chin of the spearman. The wound was fortunately shallow—a little deeper and we would've lost our informant. I guess I could let it pass. It was one hell of a scare tactic.

"Tell me what you know about the one controlling the Sea Dragon."

The two pirates begged on their knees.

"A-alright!"

"I-I'll talk, I'll talk! Just please don't kill me!"

"Who's the captain of the Sea Dragon?"

"I-I don't know!"

"Hm?" Fran thrust me into the pirate's thigh.

The spearman wrenched in pain. "Eeeeagh!"

"Who's the captain of the Sea Dragon?"

"I-I swear I don't know! That guy just came riding in with his Sea Dragon!"

"H-he's telling the truth! We'd never seen him before. He can't have been a pirate for very long!"

"Tell me what you do know."

"I-I will, so please take your sword out of me!"

"Hm." Fran nodded and pulled me out of his thigh.

The man was in tears with fear and pain. His friend knew that he was next. The small mage answered every question we asked. He didn't know the identity of the Sea Dragon, but he provided a physical description, at least. A big man with silver hair and bronze skin.

"Suarez?"

The previous king of Seedrun. What's he doing here? I thought he was

locked up after the revolution. I guessed he must've gotten out. He managed to get his Sea Dragon, too.

Then that's the Sea Dragon I almost killed.

No wonder the thing was so angry. It remembered my mana signature. We asked the men about the manatech supplying the monster with mana, but they were completely in the dark. These men were pirates and not Suarez's former followers. They were, in fact, captains of the pirate federation that used to control these waters. Suarez wouldn't trust these people enough to tell them his secrets.

"We've told you everything we know!"

"W-will you let us go now...?"

"Sure."

"R-rea—ooorh!"

Fran shoved her boot in the mage's face. The impact sent him flying overboard.

The spear-wielding pirate screamed. "Wh-what gives! Y-you said you weren't gonna kill us!"

"I won't. I'm just tossing you into the ocean because you're a nuisance."

"Wh-what the hell is wrong with—gaaah!"

If anything, Fran held back, so they were only knocked unconscious. They might survive, if fortune was on their side. Otherwise, they were pretty much dead. Well, pirates were nautical professionals and I was certain that they could use their cockroach durability to survive.

Alright—

KABOOOM! Suddenly, a large explosion rocked the ship.
KABLAM!

The Sea Dragon's attacking us!

It had noticed our prolonged absence and grown suspicious of the one remaining ship in its vicinity. The Sea Dragon fired freely. I guessed the captain was willing to kill his own men to prevent us from getting information...

We have to get out of here! Back to the Algieba!

We might be able to get through this by destroying either Suarez or the ship's manatech, but either of those things would take some time. We had to return and ask the others for help.

"Okay."

"Woof!"

"Hmm..."

"Is something the matter, Lady Miriam?" Carla asked with clear concern.

My heavy sighing hadn't escaped her notice.

"Kind of. Sorry about that."

"Are you thinking of the stolen Sea Dragon?"

"There's that. But something else is on my mind. Something more troubling."

"So it's Lady Marle."

Marle was my half sister, who had been studying in the kingdom of Belioth. She'd originally fled the country, since she couldn't spend life as a fugitive here, but she'd returned to Seedrun a few days ago, only to leave again.

"You know me well." Was I so obvious? Yes. I was very worried about Marle. "All that studying hasn't changed her a bit."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"I suppose. But that girl can get a little...impulsive, at times."

"Yes. We know that firsthand."

"Ha ha. The royal guard got many hours of training thanks to her little escapades."

"We certainly got better at capturing runaways."

"Sorry for all the trouble she gave you. Anyway, I'm wondering if giving her a Sea Dragon was the right thing. I still worry about that."

"You don't have much of a choice. You don't need to worry about her betraying you. She is quite skilled in her own right. I do not think

there is a better successor.”

“I know. But do you really think that she’ll stay out of trouble?”

“I’m...sure she’ll be fine.”

“Your brief pause spoke volumes, Carla.”

Marle lacked nuance in dealing with right and wrong. She didn’t believe in shades of grey. Even I was quite shocked by the ruthlessness she showed to her enemies. On the other hand, if she took a liking to you, then she was very sympathetic. Marle could never manage covert operations. I doubted she could bring our foolish brother in quietly. There would definitely be fireworks.

“I know your sister can be a bit of a handful, but Lady Sellimea authorized her, as well.”

If anything, my older sister was more worried when our younger sister said she wanted to be of use. I just hoped her desire to help didn’t end up hurting...

“We both made it very clear that she shouldn’t do anything crazy. I just wonder if she’ll take our advice.”

We couldn’t lose two of our Sea Dragons, that was for sure. As much as I wanted to sortie with her, I smelled trouble in the north. Raydoss had reared its ugly fleet again, and I had to remain in Seedrun to take care of them. My sister could fight if push came to shove, but sending the queen to the front line was out of the question.

“I hope you come back in one piece, Marle...”

And please, try not to cause an international incident.

“Sorry. I had to come back.”

Fran bowed her head to Jerome. I wanted to apologize, too, if I could. After all that talk, we’d completely failed. That Sea Dragon’s wouldn’t get away with forcing Fran to apologize! I was ready to accept their disappointed criticism, but they welcomed us back quite readily.

“That attack you used on the Sea Dragon was the same as the one you used on the pirate ships the other day, wasn’t it?”

“Hm.”

“Well, no helping it then. You threw a ship-sinking move out, and it barely scratched it.”

Good thing we were among reasonable adventurers. Fran told Mordred about the Sea Dragon’s powerful defense. It was protected with magic and skills, on top of its already tough dragonscales. As if those weren’t enough, the vessel was also supplying the beast with mana.

“We need to get on the ship and find whoever’s controlling the Sea Dragon.”

We could try destroying the manatech, but even after that I wasn’t sure if we could beat the beast. Capturing its tamer was a more surefire way.

“Doesn’t look like we have much of a choice.”

Mordred nodded in agreement.

“But how do we board the enemy’s ship?”

“Don’t worry. My men and I are ready!”

Jerome beat his chest with resolve. The sailors followed their captain’s cue and nodded vigorously, but there was an air of resignation about them. They knew that the Sea Dragon was much faster. Still, the crew of the *Algieba* was prepared for the unfortunate exchange. Not to rain on their parade, but this particular adventurer had ways of boarding a ship.

“Leave that to me,” said Fran.

“You sound like you have a plan.”

“Hm. I’ll send all of us over.”

This was the perfect chance to use Dimension Gate, the spell we picked up in Ulmutt. Opening a gate to somewhere we couldn’t see would be difficult, but the deck of the Sea Dragon was visible. We could open one up right now if we wanted.

Everyone looked doubtful. It was quite a statement to make after our flat failure. Dimension Magic was also very rare, and they likely didn’t believe that Fran could use it. No better way to prove it, then. We opened a short-range gate right in front of Jerome’s eyes.

“Th-this is Dimension Magic...?”

“Yeah.”

“Whooooaaaa...this is legit!”

Fran thrust her hand into the Dimension Gate and pulled the captain’s hat through.

“That’s a high-level spell...!”

“She can use thunder *and* dimension magic?!”

“You’re the best, Master!”

The spell astonished everyone. Yet again, Mordred was the first to recover. “So we’ll use that spell to board the ship?”

“Hm. I’ll open a gate to their deck.”

Jerome thought about what to do next. “We should get some distance from them.”

“Hm. No point in boarding the Sea Dragon if we don’t have a ship to come back to.”

“How are we supposed to get away?”

“It’ll be tough, but we can’t risk the *Algieba* getting pelted by the Sea Dragon’s magic.”

The *Algieba* might sink. Should we send Mordred and the rest over with Dimension Gate while Fran stayed to defend the *Algieba*? We should be able to fend off the Sea Dragon’s attacks.

Mordred agreed that there was no other way. “Alright, men! Prepare for boarding!”

“Aye, Captain!”

“We’re counting on you, Fran.”

“Hm. Good luck.”

But the alarm bells rang before we could open the gate. Five times now.

“Backup?”

“No! Five bells means an unidentified vessel!”

A new ship had appeared in the south.

“It’s moving in fast!”

“Wh-what is that?”

I didn't know anything about nautical miles, but I could tell that the sailors weren't exaggerating when they said that it was moving quickly.

"Is it another pirate fleet?"

It was possible another fleet had appeared to close off our escape, but Jerome shook his head. "Not likely. There's only one of them."

"Perhaps we should warn them."

"Hang on...no! That boat is sailing under the Seedrunian flag! Yellow flag... Chains on the bow... It's another Sea Dragon!"

Jerome's shout threw the *Algieba* into a panic. Another Sea Dragon had joined the fray, just as we were fighting the first.

"No pirate flag, though..."

"Is it an enemy?"

"I don't know. That would be the worst thing that could happen."

Escape was impossible. We were pincered.

"Captain, the other Sea Dragon's moving!"

"What? By the gods! Is it...sinking?!"

"Sinking?"

Jerome and Mordred stared in shock as the Sea Dragon sank into the waters. But it didn't look damaged, and I could tell that the entire ship was charged with mana.

"That light looks like it's dispersing the water..."

"The Sea Dragon is submerging itself!"

The crew couldn't believe their eyes. The Sea Dragon sank deeper still. The thing was a convertible submarine.

The sailors broke into chatter.

"I can feel their mana."

"So that's why they call the Sea Dragon the phantom of the seas... It's not just a matter of speed!"

Jerome, however, soon realized the danger. "If that thing attacks us from underwater, we're dead!"

"H-how will we fight it?"

Fortunately, there was no need to worry at the moment. The Sea Dragon submarine had chosen to retreat. They wanted to get away from this place as fast as possible.

The captain pondered their decision. “Are they running away from the yellow-flagged ship?”

“You mean they’re hostile to each other?” Fran asked.

“It sure as hell looks like it.”

Jerome was probably right. The blue Sea Dragon was swimming in the opposite direction.

“What now, Captain?”

“We’ll try to get as much distance from both as we can. If this newcomer insists on coming after us, well...we’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

“Aye aye, sir!”

Buffet quickly organized the crew on Jerome’s command.

What would happen next?

Chapter 5: Sea Dragons

I WONDER WHO'S ON BOARD *the new Sea Dragon.*

“Miriam?”

Can't be. Different flags.

“Sellimea?”

That's even more unlikely. I don't think they'll let the queen sortie.

The yellow-flagged Sea Dragon looked as if it were on course to meet us, so Fran and I were riding Jet out first. They signaled with their flags that they were friendly, but we went ahead just in case. Our last encounter with a Sea Dragon had been rough, to say the least. We needed to make sure whose side this ship was on.

We might end up in another fight. Don't let your guard down.

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

We slowed as we made our approach so as not to spook them. This vessel looked exactly like Miriam's. I could already feel the Sea Dragon's mana at the end of the chains. The crew readied their weapons, but they didn't seem intent on attacking. We stood watching them as they watched us.

I can see Seedrun's insignia on their armor.

So they're actually part of the navy.

Probably...

Seedrun probably sent them to apprehend Suarez. They knew that it would take one Sea Dragon to capture another. Using anything less would sentence the sailors to a wild goose chase.

Hey, is that...?

What is it, Teacher?

I recognize someone on board.

Which one?

The one at the bottom of the center mast. See that fighter in green armor?

The man had short hair and bronze skin and muscles that made him look like a bodybuilder.

I see him... Who's that supposed to be?

Fran had forgotten, of course. I didn't blame her for once—I barely remembered him, either.

That's Bike. One of Miriam's charges.

"Bike?" His name didn't refresh her memory.

You know, the one back in Seedrun! He didn't stand out much, but he was with Miriam and Carla!

"Uh."

We beat up the bad guys together!

"Uhhh."

You know what, never mind. Just...act like you know who he is.

"I can do that." Fran nodded. I didn't think she would've completely forgotten one of Miriam's charges.

Anyway, his being here means that this ship's on official Seedrun business.

I just hoped he remembered us. He probably did, considering what Fran did in Seedrun. He would've needed to be hit in the head with a particularly heavy object to forget about the revolution.

Take us down slowly, but stay sharp. I was ready to throw up a barrier if things got hairy.

"Hm. Jet."

"Woof!"

Jet drew circles in the sky and descended. We aimed for the middle of the deck, where Bike was. The crew hadn't attacked us, and I wasn't getting any hostility from Bike, either. In fact, he took notice of Fran.

He's waving at us. Fran, wave back.

"Hm."

Bike smiled as we drew closer. When Jet landed, he walked over

to us. "Fran! It's been ages!"

"You, too...Bike?"

"You remembered me!"

"Hm."

Bike smiled. *Sorry, Bike.* Fran had completely forgotten. Fortunately, the man couldn't look past Fran's poker face.

"What are you doing here?" Fran asked.

"We're chasing after a criminal."

"Suarez?"

"That's right. Sounds like you had a run-in with him."

"So he was really on that Sea Dragon?"

"Yeah...he stole it after breaking out of prison." The incident was enough to mar the dignity of his country. "It happened two weeks ago."

Suarez had escaped their maximum-security prison with the help of his supporters. Although most of them were locked up with him, some were only placed under house arrest because of a lack of evidence. They'd quietly called on Suarez's supporters from out of the country and organized the jailbreak.

"The idiot king has that many supporters?"

"Idiot as he is, he still used to be king..."

Even rotten royalty was still royalty. The tyrant still had pawns.

"In addition, he still has the backing of conservatives who refuse to be ruled by a woman. Once Queen Sellimea dismissed these sycophants from their posts, they immediately returned to their former tyrant."

Sellimea and the others expected instability to follow revolution. Good men were hard to find in Seedrun right now, and Suarez had used that chaos to escape.

"So did you end up running into Suarez?"

"Hm."

"Sorry you had to go through that..."

"He escaped before he could make contact."

"He probably noticed we were coming."

The Sea Dragons could likely identify each other from a mile away. With us in the picture, the situation was definitely not in their favor. Escape was the only reasonable option.

“Are you the captain?” Fran asked him.

“Oh, absolutely not! I am a mere lieutenant on this ship. The Sea Dragon will only listen to royal blood.”

I figured that was the case. So there was Seedrunian royalty on board?

“Princess Marle, third daughter of Seedrun, is the captain of this Sea Dragon.”

“Marle? Who’s that?”

The crew members murmured to each other, glaring at Fran dangerously.

“She called Princess Marle by name...”

“Who does that girl think she is...?”

While I appreciated their loyalty, this situation could easily get out of hand.

“Still the same, I see...” Bike only gave her a wry smile. He wasn’t surprised. The man had heard Fran address Sellimea and Miriam without a shade of formality. “Listen up, you lot. This adventurer is a friend of Queen Sellimea and Princess Miriam. Treat her well.”

“What? Are you sure, Lieutenant?”

“Of course I’m sure. This is the secret force behind our victorious revolution,” Bike said.

Some of the sailors gasped.

“Oh, no wonder she looks familiar!”

“Y-yeah! She was with the princesses!”

“Now that you mention it, that wolf was there, too!”

Many of the freedom fighters recognized the adventurer who’d fought alongside their then-princess.

“I see. So you are the adventurer Fran. My sister has told me many things about you.”

Fran turned around and saw a girl. “Who are you?”

She looked about Fran's age and height. Presence Sense informed us of someone coming on deck, but we hadn't expected a little girl. She had typical Seedrunian bronze skin and long and unkempt black hair. She was intimidating, despite her age and size. Her thin smile looked more like a predatory grin, especially in the light of her large golden eyes.

She was wearing some kind of uniform that set her apart from her men. The collar of her coat was stiff and raised, and her hat had a visor. While she wasn't decorated with medals, the Seedrun crest was displayed proudly on her chest. Her uniform was like a submarine captain I'd seen in a movie once. That was the best my poor imagination could do. She looked good in it, though, reminding me of the military-uniformed lolis you saw in anime—though unlike the lolis, this uniform suited Marle perfectly. A saber hung from her waist, and it did not look decorative.

"My name is Marle Amarillo Seedrun. I am the captain of this Sea Dragon."

"I'm Fran. Adventurer. Are you Sellimea's sister?"

"You really *do* talk like that to everyone."

"Hm?"

"Well, if my sister Sellimea allows it, then I shall as well. You may call me Marle if you wish."

Marle's speech was definitely military. She reminded me of Miriam, who combined the royal vocabulary of a princess and a tough fighter. Would Seedrun ever produce a conventional princess? We hadn't known each other for five minutes and Princess Marle was already making concessions for Fran.

Fran, say thank you.

"Hm? Thank you?"

"It's quite alright. I have some matters to discuss. I hope you don't mind."

We had questions to ask her, too. Good thing she initiated the conversation.

"Sure."

"You've had the misfortune of running into the rat bastard's

Valussa. Did you find anything out?”

“Rat bastard? Valussa?”

“You know of my fool brother Suarez. If he isn’t a rat bastard, who is?”

“I see.”

“That treacherous fiend drew his sword against my beloved sister Sellimea! Arrogance is his only talent! I swore to chase him down to the corners of hell and make him regret ever crossing her!”

Marle was very animated. She waved her little fists as she declared her death threats. The hatred contorted her face to hideous proportions. She was fiercely loyal to Sellimea (with an emphasis on “fierce”).

“Ahem...excuse me.” Marle cleared her throat, calming herself. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“That’s okay.”

“Valussa is the name of his Sea Dragon. Mine is called Wishkar. I’ll introduce you,” Marle said and took a step forward. She shouted to the waters. “Wishkar! Come say hello!”

“Krrr!”

A large shadow broke the surface of the sea. It was a Sea Dragon, alright, and it looked quite similar to Miriam’s Aqouis. Wishkar still differed enough to set it apart, of course. The scales of Miriam’s Aqouis were dark blue, and Suarez’s Valussa was ultramarine. Wishkar was a bluish purple. That was the only way I could tell them apart. I needed a closer look at the other two dragons to make a meaningful comparison.

Wishkar looked at us. Although it was stern, it looked over Marle like a loving parent. Sea Dragons were said to be under contract, but it seemed like they were consenting parties.

“What do you think? That’s a tough-looking snout, isn’t it?”

“Tough” was a bit of an understatement. “Intimidating” was more like it. The way Marle talked about her dragon showed how much she cared for it. Miriam had shown the same care for her Sea Dragon. These creatures were more than mere weapons of war.

“Hm. Very cool.” Fran looked at Wishkar with sparkling eyes. She was still a tomboy at heart and complimented the majestic beast with

the first word that came to her mind.

“Right? You’re smarter than you look!”

“Wishkar is its name?”

“Krrr!”

“Hello.”

“Krrr.”

The Sea Dragon bowed its neck to bring its face closer to Fran. It looked at her with its large pupils. She wasn’t scared, despite having a dragon breathing right in her face. She walked toward Wishkar to pet its snout.

“Hm. Very, very cool.”

“Woof woof!” Jet ran around Fran’s feet, rubbing his body against her legs to draw her attention.

“Jet?”

“Arf!”

Fran looked down at Jet, who immediately sat up and gave her his most dignified pose. He laid on his stomach, then desperately tried to stand on his hind legs.

“Woof...”

He wanted Fran to say he was cool, too. Our direwolf was a little jealous.

“That’s quite a direwolf you have there. He looks a little foolish, but I can see that’s part of his charm.”

I couldn’t tell whether that was meant to be a compliment or an insult. Marle cracked a smile. Despite her militaristic speech, she still acted like a girl.

“We’re getting off topic,” she said. “I don’t suppose you have any information concerning the rat bastard.”

“Like what?”

“Anything will do. His base of operations, the number of his men, anything.”

Marle didn’t know anything about the situation yet.

“I didn’t think we’d get so close just as we were about to launch a

full-scale investigation.”

“Why did you come to these waters?”

“A tip-off from our merchant vessels. They said we were most likely to encounter pirates here.”

While the Seedrunian sailors hadn’t spotted the fugitive Sea Dragon, they had a good hunch about where it would go. It was the right decision. They got really lucky sighting the vessel they were looking for right away, and we were even more lucky that the Wishkar came when it did.

“You’re on board a Beastman Nation merchant vessel, right?”

“Hm.”

“I see...I would like to speak to the captain. Do you mind playing the middleman?”

Teacher?

Sounds good. I didn’t think we had any business refusing. We might end up with extra guard work if the discussion went well.

“Alright,” Fran said. “I’ll go back and tell Jerome.”

“Thank you.”

We returned to the *Algieba*. The Wishkar started its approach, albeit more slowly than before.

The crew of the *Algieba* was on tenterhooks.

“Fran! You’re alive!”

“That took you awhile. How’d it go?”

“It went alright.”

“So I see...”

“Marle’s the captain.”

“Marle?”

“Hm.”

“Uhh...”

Now we were in trouble. A lot of things happened on the Wishkar and I doubted Fran could be bothered to explain.

Fran, repeat after me.

Sure.

I spoke through Fran to tell everyone else about our encounter. We started by explaining who Marle was, then I moved on to how this Sea Dragon was hunting down the fugitive former king. Finally, I told Jerome how Princess Marle wanted to talk to him.

“A princess...? Oh man...well, I guess I should’ve seen it coming. Only royalty can control the Sea Dragons.”

“What will you do, Captain?”

“Can’t exactly refuse, can I?”

“Indeed. We might get into more trouble if you did.”

Not only was she the princess of a powerful naval country, she was also packing the greatest naval force in the world.

“You’re sure they’re friendly?”

“Hm.”

“A friendly Seedrun ship...hmm...” Jerome seemed reluctant to talk to them.

“Is there a problem?”

“The Beastman Nation and Seedrun aren’t exactly on friendly terms.”

The previous Beastman monarch forged good relations with Raydoss by shipping them a steady supply of slaves. Seedrun lay in the middle of the two kingdoms and was therefore subject to pressure on both sides. Tensions arose whenever their ships crossed paths. For Seedrun, the Beastman Nation was virtually an enemy state. Accepting an invitation from such a party was reckless.

“We are in a state of emergency, though, so I doubt they’ll try anything funny... Alright. We’ll talk. I’ll go over to their ship myself. Sorry, Fran, but can you tell them for us?”

“Sure.”

Fran, Jet, and I really earned our keep after that—mediating between the Wishkar and the *Algieba*. It was tough, and anyone who thought I had it easy because I was just strapped to Fran’s back was badly mistaken. Fran did the talking, but I had to tell her what to say. Without my help, I don’t think she would’ve lasted the five trips we made. As things played out, it only took thirty minutes.

We were meant to take a smaller boat to the other ship with a representative. That was how negotiations like this usually played out. It was the best way to safeguard against sudden betrayals, but things were a little different this time round. The Wishkar was clearly stronger than us, whether it be in the pedigree of its captain or its firepower.

“They’re faster and stronger than us. They can blow us out of the water even at full speed. We’ll listen to what they have to say,” Jerome said, resigned.

If the Wishkar betrayed us, the *Algieba* was fish food.

Jerome decided to get close enough to be dangerous if push came to shove. The two ships approached each other and lined up. The distance between us was less than a meter now. Suddenly, the helmsman gave a panicked shout.

“C-Captain! I’ve lost control of the ship!”

“That’s alright. The Sea Dragon is controlling the current so we don’t ram them.”

“A-aye, sir.”

The Sea Dragon really was the most powerful vessel on the waters. Controlling water currents was definitely an advantage.

“Bridge is down!”

“Thanks!”

The Sea Dragon dropped its ladder and Jerome stepped on with a look of determination. The two ships were both large, though the *Algieba* was a little bigger.

Marle stood at the head of the greeting party, a reluctant Bike behind her. He couldn’t help being apprehensive. The lieutenant was quite upset at the princess for making herself known to Fran. Still, Marle had to be in front to show Jerome their goodwill.

Our landing party was made up of Jerome, Fran, and Mordred. If things deteriorated into a melee, the *Algieba* would have the upper hand. In that sense, the two vessels balanced each other out.

“I am Marle Amarillo Seedrun. Third daughter of the crown of Seedrun and captain of the Sea Dragon Wishkar.”

“I am Jerome. Captain of the Beastman Nation’s merchant vessel *Algieba*.”

Marle and Jerome smiled confidently and shook hands. Things looked to be off to a decent start.

Ten minutes later.

“I like you, Captain! You *do* understand!”

“Your talents are wasted as a princess, Captain Marle!”

Marle and Jerome were already good friends. She’d taken a liking to him, considering him a model man of the sea. Meanwhile, he approved of her un-princess-like behavior. Jerome slapped his knees and Marle let out a bellow of laughter that was neither ladylike nor childlike. I imagined they would’ve clapped each other’s shoulders, but with such a huge difference in size that didn’t seem likely.

“So you want us to help you blow that Sea Dragon out of the water?” Jerome asked.

“Indeed,” Marle replied. “While I am confident in the abilities of my ship and crew, it would be much easier with your help.”

“Really? So you got a plan?”

“I do.”

Marle proceeded to lay out her battle plan. As it happened, the Wishkar had an advantage in the battlefield. Valussa’s wounds still hadn’t completely healed and the vessel wasn’t completely equipped. To top it all off, the Wishkar had an anti-Sea Dragon weapon, which would explain why the Valussa turned tail.

“We definitely have the better chance at long range.”

Capturing Suarez would be a difficult task, however. Suarez’s ship was manned with escaped convicts who knew how to fight.

“We might have to end up killing Valussa.”

“But it’s one of your precious Sea Dragons. Are you sure about that?”

“I don’t have much choice. Setting it free would have terrible consequences. National shame aside, it would definitely end up affecting shipping routes across the waters. We must prevent that from

happening.”

“Fair enough.”

“But now that you’re here...” Marle grinned at Fran and Mordred.

I didn’t know how strong Marle was—using Identify on royalty was a bad idea—but I could tell that she was strong. The mana emanating from her suggested that she could use magic, but she was probably just as handy in a swordfight. In any case, she was strong enough to sense Fran and Mordred’s strength.

“With Fran and a B-Rank adventurer on our side, we have the upper hand in a melee. Just leave the spotting to us!”

Marle’s plan involved having the Wishkar hold the Valussa in place while Fran boarded to capture him.

“Hmm...” Jerome gave it some thought.

As dangerous as the Valussa was, it was nowhere to be seen. The *Algieba* could now easily continue on to the Beastman Nation. Participating in the hunt for the blue Sea Dragon was a risky venture. What was more, Fran and Mordred were only contractors and not part of his official crew. Without the looming threat of the Sea Dragon, he wasn’t sure whether he had the authority. It was like hiring adventurers to escort you from one town to another, then asking them to root out a thieves’ den. It was out of contract, and they might even be excused for leaving. The problem now was that Mordred and the others had no way to leave. The adventurers could mutiny, but it would sour the relationship between guild and government.

Marle understood his predicament. “You won’t be doing this for free, of course.”

“Oh? Go on.”

“Assist me, and I will see to it that we discuss a potential trade route with your nation.”

“What...!”

“Our cabinet ministers will participate in the negotiation.”

“And...you’re going to make this deal in the middle of the ocean?”

“Would you rather I waited till we reached land? Besides, capturing this criminal is far more important.”

The two kingdoms were not on speaking terms, but that was

mostly because of the Beastman Nation. Jerome was quite shocked by Marle's magnanimous gesture. It was like a former victim telling her bully that she would forgive him. Jerome might be excused for thinking that she had an ulterior motive. He looked conflicted. I didn't know much about politics, but dealing with Seedrun would definitely have ramifications.

Jerome was a captain of a ship, but he was also an official of the Beastman Nation. He couldn't help thinking about the implications of such a deal. I didn't think he'd noticed, but Seedrun wanted to be on good terms with the Beastman Nation again. It had completely cut ties with Raydoss and wanted to deepen its relations with Granzell. Now the Beastman Nation was an independent kingdom and an ally of Granzell, forging relations was a matter of national policy and defense. With the Beastman Nation's help, they could better fend off any Raydossian attack.

"What do you say? I think it's a good deal," Marle said, without mentioning the implications to Jerome.

The princess had a knack for sudden negotiations. Whichever side showed weakness now would be at a disadvantage. For what it was worth, Marle looked absolutely confident. While Jerome was an excellent captain and sailor, he didn't know much about the finer side of politics. He couldn't make out what Marle stood to gain.

"I-I suppose so..."

"Captain, let's discuss this further before we go on," Buffet whispered. The first mate knew what Marle was after.

She caught the gesture and grinned. "Sailing with us would be your safest bet," she said. "As long as you don't know where that rat bastard's Sea Dragon is."

"Hrmph..." The first mate smiled wryly.

Marle was right. The *Algieba* had no way of beating the Valussa. Even our best-laid plans had no guarantee of succeeding. Buffet had no choice but to concede. If we upset the Seedrunians here, we would have to make the rest of the voyage on our own. In fact, we might even end up having to fight the Wishkar.

"But do go and talk about it first. I know that I am asking much."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Buffet bowed his head. It looked like

the first mate was used to handling the captain's negotiations for him. "I thank you in the name of the captain."

"I would clarify one thing before you go. I will not destroy you if you do not wish to cooperate. My sister owes her life to Fran."

Jerome breathed a sigh of relief. He knew that Marle wouldn't lie, but she hadn't finished yet.

"However, we will have to part ways. Finding that rat bastard is my top priority. I hope you understand."

Jerome looked disappointed, and Buffet sighed at the captain's blatant display of emotion. Despite his best attempts at a poker face, Jerome had given away his intentions.

"We'll return to our ship and talk about it."

"Go ahead."

"Come along, Captain."

"R-right."

The first mate dragged Jerome back to the *Algieba*. The discussion of what we should do next took place on the *Algieba's* deck.

"So what do you think, Captain?"

"As a sailor, I think it's too dangerous...but as a Beastman National, it's too good to pass up."

"Yes, I would like to accept their offer if possible."

"Much as I would love to...it's not going to be easy..."

"I agree."

Both captain and first mate turned their gazes to Mordred and Fran.

Jerome wasn't one for subtle negotiation and decided to make the request clearly. "Fran, Mordred, I want in on that deal. Will you help us? We need your strength, so please!" He bowed his head.

Buffet followed suit. "We'll add to your reward, of course."

Captain Jerome was a romantic. He made a good pair with his practical first mate. The price was quite handsome, but even without it, Fran was always ready for a good fight.

Teacher, can we join?

It'll be dangerous. You saw what that Sea Dragon could do. Are you sure?

I don't want to run away.

Yeah, I figured. We gotta pay those bastards back.

Hm!

As much as I wanted to run away, it was difficult given that we were smack in the middle of the ocean. I couldn't tell how far we were from land.

Mordred's eyes went slightly wide. Then he shrugged and put his hands up in the air. "I guess we're in, too."

His participation seemed dependent on Fran's. Mordred knew that her presence would contribute a great deal to the operation's success. His party didn't raise any complaints. They completely trusted in their leader's decisions.

"A-are you sure?" Buffet asked.

"Hm."

"We have a chance of winning with the Black Lightning Princess on our side," said Mordred. "If she wasn't here, I would've refused."

"How come?"

"We wouldn't be able to do our jobs if she bailed. Might as well be a suicide mission." Mordred had considered the possibility Fran might leave after witnessing Jet fly through the air. He probably didn't know that Jet couldn't fly over long distances.

"Thank you," said Buffet. "We should ask the rest of your party."

"And if they don't want to?" Mordred asked.

"Unfortunately, we would have to refuse Princess Marle's offer."

"You're okay with that?"

"We have no choice. Forging a relationship with Seedrun is important, but not at the cost of sacrificing our relationship with the Adventurer's Guild."

The first mate smiled confidently. He knew how to conduct negotiations. The other adventurers were summoned and casually accepted their new quest. Crystal Guardians, Fran's temporary students, declared that they would go wherever their master went. The brothers

of Red Earth were even more casual about it. They happily accepted after hearing about the raise. Buffet had expected this turn of events. The adventurers were more than ready to board a Sea Dragon, even before we made contact with Wishkar. They were even less afraid now that we had a good chance to win.

“Listen up, you scallywags! We may be up against a Sea Dragon, but we have a Sea Dragon on our side, too! Don’t you get cold feet!”

“We won’t, Cap’n!”

“That Sea Dragon’s about to become an oversize chum bucket!”

“You said it, Cap’n!”

“Don’t let me down, boys!”

“YEEAAAAAH!”

Jerome fired up everyone—sailor and adventurer alike. Honestly, the whole speech sounded like it could’ve come from a pirate captain. Well, being angry was better than being afraid, I supposed.

“Yeah.”

Fran raised her fist in the air. It was nice to see her having fun.

“We have finished setting up the Dragon Enhancer, Lord Suarez.”

“You’re late!”

“I am terribly sorry.”

“Hmph. So the repairs are complete?”

“Well, we don’t have any engineers on board, so...”

“You’ve already given me this excuse! If we don’t have technicians, then get the mages to fix it!”

“They can’t, sir. The only thing mages can do is prepare magic circles.”

“Do something about it.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Get them to fix the parts the engineers should be fixing!”

“Impossible. It could become irreparable down the road.”

“Confound it all! You’re all useless!”

“Also, Varthez and Voluze are going mad again.”

“Again? I thought we just gave them pirates to play with.”

“They’ve been going through them a lot faster these past few days. They’ve been killing them just to calm their nerves.”

“Tch! Then pick some people out and toss them to them.”

“Are you sure, sir? We don’t have any pirates left.”

“We still have soldiers from the old country, don’t we?”

“Are you absolutely certain about this?”

“Will there be a problem?”

“It will affect morale, sir.”

“The men are nothing but a waste of resources. They can serve me best by dying so they don’t take up any more food.”

“I shall make the arrangements.”

“Just pick whoever you want as long as those brothers don’t go berserk.”

“As strong as those lunatics are, they remain dangerous. Even when captive.”

“They are Valusa’s successors after all.”

“What about the course then, sir?”

“Can’t we go back to the island?”

“I don’t think so...not with Wishkar nearby.”

“Do you think they’re equipped with the means to find us?”

“Most definitely.”

“We can’t keep on going underwater. Valussa needs to come back up for air!”

“It’s risky, but shall we try that island?”

“Hmm...I suppose we can reach it if we push Valussa a little.”

“I think so, too.”

“Make way for the Kraken’s Nest, then. It will delay Valussa’s full

recovery, but it will have to do. We'll stop there before going into Raydoss!"

"It's a shame that our detour south to throw your sister off the scent was for nothing."

"Cursed usurpers! I'll make her regret the day they crossed me!"

"Lady Marle is about to lay out the plan, so listen up!"

The crew of the *Algieba* was back on the Sea Dragon for the mission briefing. The manatech had a limited range, so the sooner we set off, the better.

"Our mission is simple, but whether we succeed depends on your effort."

The adventurers were quite startled when they saw that the captain of the Wishkar was a girl of fourteen or fifteen years old. But they turned to Fran, an even younger monster, and any doubts they had melted away.

The operation was simple enough. The Wishkar would hold the Valussa in place with its anti-Sea Dragon manatech. The adventurers would then board the Valussa and apprehend Suarez. Simply attacking the enemy vessel from the Wishkar would be difficult—it had to be a significant distance away from the target. Wishkar risked enraging Valussa if the Sea Dragons came too close. That was where the *Algieba* came in.

"Commence operation!"

"Aye!!"

"My handpicked mariners, your enemy is a Sea Dragon! As such, we are on a level playing field! Let them taste the fruits of your training!"

"Aye!!"

"We thank our brothers in arms for aiding us in our time of need! We thank the brave adventurers and crew of the *Algieba*! Go and make me proud!"

“Aye!!”

Marle’s speech roused everyone present. Men of the sea seemed like they were an easy bunch to pump up.

“Aye,” said Fran.

“Aye, indeed, Master!” her cadets added.

“We’ll do our best, too!”

“We’ll show them our training!”

Sailors were a lot like adventurers in that regard. Fran and her students pumped their fists, despite not fully understanding what Marle was talking about.



Two hours later, and we were on our way to the Kraken's Nest—with the *Algieba* in tow behind the Wishkar. The area suited its name perfectly, with gigantic Krakens practically crawling beneath the surface of the water. Fortunately, the Sea Dragon was too fast and left them in the dust.

"I see it! Sea Dragon ahead!"

"Where?"

"Right there!" Jerome pointed to a dot on the horizon.

I couldn't see it from here, but the sailors were used to it.

"It's trying to run, but it's not going as fast as it can."

"Why?"

"I don't know...but this is our chance!"

"Get everyone ready."

"You got it! Come on, you scallywags! It's time for action!"

Everyone on board the *Algieba* prepared by checking their equipment and encouraging their friends. Everyone was raring to go. At least we didn't have to worry about deserters. If anything, we should worry about reckless behavior. In the meantime, the Valussa was getting closer and closer.

"It's finally time, Master."

"Time to try everything you taught us!"

"We'll get the enemy commander!"

"Don't force yourselves," Fran warned. "Focus on not dying."

"Thank you, Master!"

Fran made a pretty good teacher, all things considered. I didn't want any of these kids to die.

"I'll give the order, Black Lightning Princess. Feel free to do your own thing."

"Thanks, Mordred."

Mordred was now commander of the *Algieba*'s combatants. Jerome

had personally requested it. Despite only being acquainted for a short period of time, they both knew that putting Fran in charge was a recipe for disaster. And now we were free to do what we wanted.

“Contact in a few minutes!”

“Hm!”

We were now close enough that the enemy vessel was visible to the naked eye.

“Sea Dragon Wishkar has flashed their signal!”

Marle had successfully locked down Valussa, although it came at a cost to the Wishkar’s own mobility. We needed to move quickly—the seal wouldn’t last for long. We still had Krakens to be wary of, and the Kraken-warding manatech wasn’t perfect. We needed to finish this job as fast as possible.

“The enemy looks ready,” Mordred said, pointing to the armed men on the deck of the Valussa.

They stood with their bows at the ready. While Fran and Mordred would easily survive the initial volley, I doubted the same would be true for the rest of the crew. Fortunately, we didn’t have to open with a frontal assault.

“Black Lightning Princess!”

“Hm!”

I activated Dimension Gate, careful to act as if Fran was the one casting it. A black hole the size of a door appeared when she thrust out her hand. The blackness shifted into the deck of a different ship.

“Did it work?”

“Hm.”

“Alright! Take down the archers!”

Normally, people hesitated before jumping through a mysterious portal, but that wasn’t the case with adventurers. On Mordred’s command, everyone poured through like an avalanche. The pirates were already screaming on the other side. Though greater in number, they were no match for Mordred and his men.

“We should go, too.”

Yeah!

“Woof!”

As we stepped through, pirates were running for their lives. There was confusion as an archer tried to flee Mordred’s spear. They expected the *Algieba* to board, but they didn’t expect it to be from the inside. Fran quickly dispatched the errant pirates.

“Haaaa!”

“Gods, there’s more of them!”

“Gyaaaa!”

She decapitated two with one swing and kicked their headless bodies into their shipmates. Fran went deeper and hacked away. We couldn’t use magic without hitting our allies, but a sword was more than enough. Fran dashed in, and screams and blood soon followed.

Fran, we should start looking for Suarez.

Hm.

This place is too big for a random search. Grab one of the pirates and ask him where the captain is.

Got it.

Fran scanned the dock and fixed her gaze on a man who looked like he was in charge. His equipment was certainly extravagant, and I assumed he was one of Suarez’s knights. Fran dashed toward him as he panicked.

“Wh—gah!”

The commander was only slightly stronger than the pirates. He reacted to Fran’s sudden appearance with a surprised yelp. She grabbed his neck with her left hand and slammed him into the deck. He coughed and choked, but she showed him no mercy. She raised her free hand, balled it into a fist and beat his face.

“Aaah! St-stop it!”

Fran gave him a down payment of pain. She would usually take more time with the interrogation, but we had none to waste.

“Hey.”

“Aieeee!” The man shrieked as his nose bled. He was terrified, and Fran was Intimidating him for good measure.

“Where’s Suarez? Answer me or I’ll kill you.”

“Y-you—eeergh!”

“Heal. Waste my time and I’ll kill you. Beg for mercy and I’ll kill you. Where is Suarez?”

“Aah...gyaaaaah!” The man became unintelligible.

Unfazed, Fran grabbed his hand and crushed it. It looked like she was shaking his hand, but she could crush metal with that grip. “Heal. Where’s Suarez? Answer me and I’ll put you out of your misery.”

“Th-the command room!”

“Good. I’ll put you out of your misery now.”

“What?”

The man misunderstood Fran in his panic. She proceeded to put him out of his misery permanently by chopping his head off.

“Master, that was ruthless!”

“She’s so cool when she’s merciless!”

“We have much to learn.”

The newbies seemed a little too enthusiastic. Well, you couldn’t be too safe around pirates, so I guessed this was a good lesson for the rookies.

Now, to look for Suarez.

“Hm.”

Do you know where the command room is?

“No.”

I’ll lead the way.

Fortunately, the layout of this Sea Dragon was exactly like that of Marle’s Wishkar. The command room should be toward the bow.

“Jet, help us find him.”

“Woof!”

We split up to cover more ground. The *Algieba*’s fighters should have no trouble recognizing the direwolf by now. Anyone who attacked him was clearly an enemy.

We’ll take the bow, you take the stern.

“Woof.”

Capture him if you can, but come back if things get rough.

“Bark bark!”

“Let’s go.”

We parted ways and went down into the ship. There were guards posted along the corridors, but Fran disposed of them as she went. We searched until we felt a strong battle aura in front of us. Someone was fighting here.

Fran!

“Hm!”

She quickly followed the sounds of battle and kicked in the door to what turned out to be an empty storeroom. Adventurers and pirates stared each other down in there, but only the two in the middle were clashing weapons. We recognized the first as Mordred, which meant the man he was fighting must be Suarez. This was our first encounter with the former tyrant, and I must confess that he was quite strong. He had Advanced Ax Mastery, so he knew how to fight.

“Fools. Did you think you would leave this ship alive?” Suarez demanded.

“I’ll admit the Sea Dragon is the most powerful vessel in the ocean. But all I have to do is take down its captain.”

“Gya ha ha! That’s a funny joke! I’ll grind you up into paste and feed you to the fishes. Just like all the others!”

Just like all the others? So he frequently tortured people before tossing them overboard? Suarez couldn’t have been a pirate for very long and he had already done so much harm...

As I pondered that, Mordred and Suarez lunged at each other again.

“Raaargh!”

“Hmph!”

Suarez brought his battle-ax down on Mordred’s head. His attack was quite fast—if he was an adventurer, he would have made a decent C-Rank. But I wasn’t the least bit worried for Mordred.

“Too slow.”

“Impudent fool!”

Mordred drove his spear into the flat of Suarez's ax. The diversion made Suarez sway, but he held his ground and swung again. An ordinary adventurer wouldn't be able to dodge, but Mordred was no ordinary adventurer. He calmly deflected the fierce attack.

Suarez was a decent fighter in the grand scheme of things, but Mordred was an honest-to-gods B-Rank. And one who specialized in combat, at that. His skills and stats were leagues above Suarez. There was no way he would lose a fair fight.

"Curse you!"

Suarez charged again, refusing to accept it. He charged in recklessly, but just as he was about to cut Mordred in half, Suarez changed the course of his swing and attacked one of Mordred's companions, instead. The mage was ill-prepared for close quarters combat.

"Gua ha ha!" Suarez cackled.

If Mordred let the attack land, he'd put his comrade's life in danger. If he tried to stop it, he'd endanger his own life. That was Suarez's plan.

"Fiend!"

"Gya ha ha! Give up!"

Suarez laughed as he saw Mordred's desperation. Mordred thrust out his hand, as if he was helpless to prevent the attack. The ax came down on his right arm, but of course it wasn't a desperate act at all.

"Metal Control."

"Wh-what is this?!"

"Your ax is mine."

The giant battle-ax folded into itself like clay. And the surreal scene didn't end there. The fluid metal pulsed and writhed as if it were alive.

"Gaaah! Magic?!"

"Be bound by your own weapon."

Mordred used his Steel Magic to wrap Suarez's ax around himself.

"No, no, NO!"

Suarez struggled, but to no avail. He was soon wrapped up in his

own battle-ax. Once the liquid metal encased his top and lower body, Mordred commanded it to solidify. Even Suarez, who prided himself on brute strength, had no way of escaping. If anything, Mordred had made the metal even harder.

“Aaaaargh! Let me go!”

“Save your energy and stop struggling.”

The tyrant was now in chains. The pirates moved in to help their leader.

“L-Lord Suarez!”

“Let go of him, you bastards!”

“Hold it.” Fran cut them all down before they had time to react.

“Gyaaa!”

“Guaaah!”

“Nice,” Mordred said.

“You, too,” said Fran. “I didn’t even get to fight.”

“Only because the ambush went well. Save the compliments for later. We’ve got a Sea Dragon to stop.”

“Hm.”

Mordred and Fran looked down on Suarez, but the former tyrant hadn’t lost his arrogance.

“You! Get me out of here, this instant!”

“Why?”

“Wh-who do you think I am, you boorish adventurer?!”

“A scumbag pirate captain?” Fran asked.

“Someone who exists only to cause trouble?” Mordred added.

“I am the King of Seedrun! Do you understand?!”

“Hmph.”

“Bastard!”

Mordred ground his heel into Suarez’s head. An excellent gesture from the veteran adventurer. Fran wasted no time in following his example.

“Stop this foolishness! Bow down to me and I’ll make you a

minister!”

Was Suarez dropped on his head as a baby? How did he have the balls to make claims like that? Didn't he understand the situation?

“I am the King of Seedrun and captain of this Sea Dragon! Lick my boots and all is forgiven!”

Suarez's inability to read the room went beyond ordinary social awkwardness. I was amazed that he had managed to survive this long. Then again, perhaps this very arrogance was what allowed him to usurp the throne. To be honest, this kind of intimidation was probably effective against pirates. They were stupid enough to be impressed, especially with the commandeered Sea Dragon in tow. Suarez probably promised them all rewards, but that wasn't going to work against Fran and Mordred.

“You *used* to be king. The current queen is Sellimea.”

“To hell with you! *I* am the king!”

“No, you're not.”

“Yes, I am! *I* am the rightful King of Seedrun! Me! Sellimea is nothing but a dirty usurper!”

Suarez's childish rejection sounded more unbecoming because he was so huge. Then again, perhaps he was still a child on the inside. As the only legitimate child of the crown, he was showered with undeserved praise and benefits, and had become more crooked with each day.

“Enough of this.”

“Yeah. We're wasting our time.”

Fran and Mordred agreed their words were wasted on him. They ignored Suarez's complaints and cranked the Intimidation.

“You. Stop the Sea Dragon.”

Fran did the talking while Mordred backed her up. I thought it would've been more effective the other way round, but Mordred let Fran have first dibs.

“Hmph!” Suarez turned away. Call it royal stubbornness or fighter's spirit. Honestly, I thought Suarez was dense beyond salvation.

“Hrm.” Fran ground her heel into Suarez's face again, harder than before.

“Gaaah! That hurts! Stop it, girl!”

How dare he! I knew people who would be beside themselves with joy if Fran stepped on them. But I supposed that, for people who weren't so inclined, this torture was indeed painful.

“Last warning. Calm the Sea Dragon.” Fran glared coldly at Suarez, clearly displaying her murderous intent. The Intimidate of two high-rank adventurers should be enough to cause a normal person to wet himself.

Unfortunately, Suarez only glared back. “Cease your talking and let me go!”

He really was stupid.

“Alright.”

“Good, now hurry up and—”

“I'll stop talking now.”

Suarez screamed in pain as Fran gouged his calf with her sword.

“Heal. Now, the next leg.”

“St-stop! Stop this!”

“Say ‘please.’”

“You basta—”

“Hrmph.”

“Gyaaaaa!”

Fran continued healing and stabbing. It took a good five rounds before the man finally realized that the little girl was in the position of power.

“St-stop! P-please!” With fear of death back in him, Suarez pleaded for his life. Those weren't the words we wanted to hear, however.

“Calm the Sea Dragon. I know you can command it from here.”

“Alright! I'll do it! Just stop—”

Stab.

“Eeeegh!”

“Heal.”

“Aaaargh! Please, stop!”

“Shut up and do as you’re told.”

“Alright!” Suarez nodded, pale from resisting pain. “I-I, Suarez Azul Seedrun, command thee—”

“Gyaaa!”

“Hrm.”

A scream cut off Suarez’s incantation, but it didn’t come from the Sea Dragon’s captain. It came from one of Mordred’s men. He’d been stabbed in the stomach and he crumpled to the floor. The one who stabbed him was one of the enemy soldiers lying on the floor.

“Come on, Your Majesty. Are you giving up already?”

“V-Varthez! There you are!”

“You made for a decent show.”

“Where’s Voluze? Whatever! Hurry up and take care of these vermin!” Suarez suddenly regained his spirit. I was really beginning to think that this kind of confidence was some kind of mental disorder.

“Okay okay, quit shouting.”

There was something strange about Suarez’s champion. He looked to be one of the men who’d been knocked unconscious. I didn’t have the time to identify all of our enemies, but there was something odd about the way he carried himself. He had not looked this dangerous before.

The man in front of us had typical brown hair and bronze skin, slender but toned. He was also emitting a fierce aura, one that Suarez couldn’t hope to match. This change told me that the man called Varthez was not to be trifled with. He could mask his abilities.

“Honestly, boss, I don’t know if I can win. But if now’s your time to go, then it’s your time to go, right?”

I had a feeling of déjà vu when he grinned. I had felt this aura before.

Fran recognized it, too. “Valuza?”

The man we’d fought a fierce duel with back in Seedrun. He was the kingdom’s foremost fighter, and a blood knight at that. He had far more skill and experience than Fran. If his blade, Soul Drain, hadn’t made me lose control, I wasn’t sure we could have won. Valuza was

that strong. Fighting him was one of Fran's great milestones.

"Oh? Are you the girl who killed my master?"

"You're Valuza's student?"

"You could say that. I was very disappointed to hear that a little girl took him out. But I suppose I can see how you beat him."

"Stop talking and help me!"

Varthez smirked at Suarez's barking. He had no respect for his employer. "Come now, don't rush me. I'm enjoying this."

"I'm not," said Fran.

"Don't say that, girl. How can you resist baring your heart to the man who is going to kill you?" Varthez's eyes darkened. He might have been Valuza's student, but the pupil had a deeper darkness. Varthez was an insane and sadistic murderer, and made very little effort to conceal it.

Fran, we need to heal Mordred's mage before he dies.

"Hm...Mordred."

"Yeah?"

"What?" said Varthez. "No one-on-one?"

"I have no time for your games."

"Oh, this one?" he said. "You can have him."

"Gaah!"

Varthez kicked Mordred's teammate over and Fran caught him. Blood poured freely from his wound and she wasted no time in healing it. His face was still pale. A deadly poison had gotten into his system. Fortunately, we could still heal him.

Varthez looked surprised. "Wow, you can use Healing Magic, too?"

"Thanks, Black Lightning Princess," said the mage.

"Hm. You have to rest now."

"Alright." Mordred's man thanked her. He wouldn't be able to fight for a while, but he would recover from the poison.

"Nice. Shame, though. I was about to give him some new friends," Varthez said as multiple magic circles appeared around his feet.

Several figures began crawling out of them.

“Vaaaaaargh...”

Necromancy. The man had reanimated the dead fighters. They retained their physical strength, but were as tough as regular zombies. While easy to dispose of individually, they were quite dangerous in a mob. Varthez was as good at necromancy as he was at fighting. He was at least a mid-rank mage at Level 7. In fact, he could prepare this spell and delay its casting while lying on the floor.

Varthez’s mastery over magic might make him more dangerous than Valuza. Valuza had drained his enemy’s mana, but we didn’t really have to look out for any weird spells. At least Varthez wasn’t likely to be as dangerous at melee range.

Team up with Mordred and flatten him. We don’t have time to waste.

Varthez looked disappointed when both Fran and Mordred readied their weapons. “I gave him back to you. Hold up your end of the deal.”

“I don’t remember making any deal.”

“That’s right.”

“Hee hee. What a shame. But are you sure both of you should be here? I think my brother Voluze should’ve reached the other Sea Dragon by now. You should lend them a hand.”

“What?”

Mordred hesitated. He couldn’t tell whether Varthez was lying. Essence of Falsehood told me that he wasn’t.

“He should be enjoying himself right about now, probably chopping the princess to pieces.”

Should we split up or stick together to kill him as fast as we could?

Mordred decided for us. “Go on, Black Lightning Princess.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’d have trouble crossing over to the Wishkar.”

“Alright.”

“Besides...” Mordred lowered his voice and glared at Varthez.

Varthez laughed with joy at the adventurer’s murderous intent. He

sounded exactly like Valuza. “Hee hee hee! You’ll make a fine playmate!”

“...He got one of my men. I have to pay him back for that.”

Mordred’s not going down without a fight, Fran. We should hurry to the Wishkar.

“Hm. I’ll leave this one to you.”

“I’ve got it covered.”

“She’s gone.”

After the Black Lightning Princess left the room, I turned to face the lunatic Varthez. I had seen his type before. They all had different reasons, but all of them enjoyed killing, as if it were a hobby. These lunatics often treated their own lives like a toy. Very dangerous if they happened to possess any amount of power.

“He he heh. I can’t wait to play with you...I’m getting goose bumps!” Varthez readied his sword and his zombies readied theirs.

“I thought you wanted to go one-on-one.”

“I do. These boys are part of my repertoire.”

Of course they are, you cheeky bastard.

“B-boss...”

“Make sure Suarez doesn’t get away. I’ll take care of this one myself.”

“Got it!”

I gave my men the signal to leave the room, and Varthez made his move.

“He he heh. Here we go!”

Varthez’s strange sword was curved like a scimitar, but it had fine spikes on the blade. Even if you managed to avoid its business end, those spikes would probably catch you. And those spikes were definitely poisoned.

“Shaaaaa!” Varthez lunged. The sword traveled through an

impossible arc, making it difficult to avoid.

“Kiieeeee!”

“I can see you!”

A tricky maneuver, but still visible. I blocked it easily, even while being attacked by his zombie horde. I began casting while still on my guard.

“Metal Control.”

“Wow! I didn’t expect you to complete a spell under this much pressure! But that! Won’t! Work!”

“Tch!”

Varthez dissipated my spell with a swipe. His sword was enchanted.

“I saw how you melted Lord Suarez’s ax. I’d love to see some advanced Steel Magic, but why don’t you stick to the basic stuff?!”

Fire and earth spells were difficult to use here. Fire would endanger the ship, and there wasn’t enough soil to use Earth Magic. But when Varthez asked me to stick to basic Steel Magic, he didn’t know what he was asking for.

“__”

“You’re casting again? How stupid can you get! You don’t have time to cast now!”

“__”

“Get him, zombies!”

“!”

The zombies lurched toward me. They didn’t care for their lives (or lack of) and their main focus was to stop me from moving.

“Hyaaahaa!” Varthez curved his scimitar around me as I pierced the zombies with my spear. His timing was perfect. I had no way to dodge. “Got you!” His calculations were perfect. He swung his sword in such a way that I would have no time to block. It was only a matter of time before the scimitar cut into me.

Varthez’s mistake was in assuming that the spear was my only weapon.

“Hardness Cocoon.”

“Bwuh?”

The spell transformed metal into string, which wove itself into a cocoon. These metal cocoons were highly resistant against blunt and sharp weapons. Its effectiveness relied on the quality of the metal, which was why I used my own armor. The enchanted steel wrapped around my body and stopped Varthez’s attack. The cocoon appeared soft, but Varthez gave a startled shriek when he made contact with it.

“I’ll stick to the basics, sure. But even the basic stuff is enough to kill.”

“My sword...it’s stuck!”

Varthez’s scimitar was lodged in the metal cocoon. The odd shape was now working against him. “Vaaargh!”

“Vraaaa!” The zombies attacked, but were all stopped by the cocoon.

“You’re talking big for a man playing like a turtle! What now? Are you going to stab me with your spear from there?!”

“I’m turtling, you say? I suppose it looks that way, but you’re wrong if you think that this is all the spell is for.” I ignored Varthez’s complaints and started casting again. “Raging Metal.”

My cocoon armor started to pulse and change its shape. The metal squirmed like a living thing before it finally exploded.

“Gyaaaaaaaargh!” Varthez let out an ear-piercing howl.

The metal strings had pierced every inch of him. The human body was no match for reinforced and enchanted metal wires. His zombies came to a halt, too. The threads ran through their bodies and destroyed their mana circuits. And what happened to the zombies soon happened to their master. The strings traveled and pulsed through his entire body. Varthez was close to death, but I wouldn’t show mercy to the madman.

“Eeeergggh!” Varthez cried out in agony. He was strong, and his strength prevented him from dying. All he could do was endure his death throes, twitching in the pain of internal hemorrhaging.

“Enjoy your final moments of pain.”

We rushed toward the deck, leaving Varthez to Mordred and the rest of the Breath of the Steel God.

“Woof!”

“Jet.”

We rendezvoused with Jet in the tight corridor. He kicked against the wall and joined us at full sprint like a ninja. When he realized that we were heading for the deck, he waited for orders.

Back to the Wishkar! We'll leave this ship to Mordred!

“Woof!”

“How did he get to Marle?”

Maybe a raft. Could've been magic or a skill, too.

Valuza had a skill called Water Strider. He'd probably used that to board enemy ships when he was alive. We let our guard down—I didn't think they would prioritize attacking the Wishkar over protecting Suarez.

We reached the deck and found that Suarez's men were already defeated and bound.

Do you sense anything from the Wishkar?

“Can't tell from here.”

“Woof.”

We would have to go back to see.

“Jet.”

“Bark!”

Fran got on, and Jet shot off like a bullet. We were only about a hundred meters from the Wishkar, and it didn't take long to reach it. With Water Strider, it wouldn't have taken Voluze long.

“Teacher, someone's down!”

Dammit! Please let us make it in time!

But our panic soon subsided. The battle was already over by the time we landed on the Wishkar's deck. There was blood everywhere, and injured fighters were being treated on the sidelines.

Two figures faced off in the middle of the carnage. We recognized one of them as Princess Marle. Her eyes were burning with battle fury,

though her face remained stone cold. Opposite her was a man in black who looked a lot like Varthez. Voluze's face was chiseled slightly differently from his brother's and was currently contorted into a pitiful shape.

"Aaah...aaag..." Voluze shivered and fell to his knees.

His lower body was encased in ice. His hands reached out as he froze from the shoulder down. The only thing he could do was wiggle his fingers. His eyelids were fixed open as his tear ducts froze over. Cracks formed in the corners of his eyes and the fluid inside them solidified.

"Aaarrg..."

"Hmph. All that talk and this is all you can do?"

"Kill...me..."

"What did you say before we fought? I believe it was about how you would torture me without killing me. I also believe you said you would violate me in front of my men."

"Ill...ee..."

"Come now, where did your earlier spirit go? Where is the man who harmed my men?!"

"Aaah...haaarg..."

Marle calmly chastised Voluze as he begged for mercy. He emitted a dry moan, as if in despair. Then again, that might just be him losing the function of speech.

"Hmph. You deserve a fate a thousand times worse than this for harming my men...but alright. I will be merciful."

Marle batted her arm and decapitated Voluze with a single slash. Blood gushed out, but it froze before it could hit the floor, creating a magnificent frozen fountain. Voluze's corpse looked like an avant-garde ice sculpture. I know I'm not one to talk—being Fran's partner and all—but it was a very gruesome killing and not at all childlike. Marle would not let her men suffer in vain.

The princess noticed that Fran had arrived and casually turned to greet her. "Yes, Fran? Have you completed the mission?"

"I heard that the enemy was boarding Wishkar."

"Ah, so you've come to aid us. I have to say you're a little bit too

late for that. The battle is over.”

“You got him?”

“Indeed. I am stronger than I look.”

You could say that again. I may have underrated Marle’s abilities. I thought she was a decent fighter but couldn’t use magic. I was severely mistaken. She was a great fighter and probably an excellent mage to boot.

“How are things on the Valussa?”

“We got Suarez. Mordred is taking care of his last lieutenant.”

“I see. That is good to hear. Can I bother you to return there to make sure things are going smoothly?”

“You’ve got things handled here?”

“Very much, yes. We’ve already finished caring for the injured.”

I managed to sneak an Identify on Voluze before he died, and he was quite strong. While Valuze’s swordsmanship was still vastly superior, Voluze made up for it with his sheer physicality. He was completely maxed out for melee combat, unlike Varthez, and his agility was on the level of an Awakened beastman. He’d managed to get the drop on Marle, and yet she took care of him without suffering a single casualty or even a scratch on her person.

Underestimating her was a terrible mistake.

Chapter 6: Animals

FRAN WAS ABOUT TO RIDE Jet back to the Valussa when it happened.

“Hrm?”

Did you feel that, t—whoa!

“Woof?”

The Wishkar rocked slightly, then shook as if it were being struck by great waves. However, the waters around us were calm.

It’s coming from the bow...

“Wishkar’s acting funny.”

Fran was right. The Sea Dragon was convulsing violently, sending vibrations up the chains.

“No...no!”

“Marle?”

Fran turned around to find her panicking. The sight of the calm and composed girl losing her cool was off-putting. What was going on?

“Wishkar’s in pain!”

The Sea Dragon was hurting? How?

Fran, toss me into the water!

“Hm! Haaa!”

With Fran’s help, I dove into the ocean. Moments after I hit the surface, I saw a large shadow in front of me. This was Wishkar. There was something strange about its figure, however. There appeared to be some kind of lump attached to it. I drew closer to get a better look, and was greeted with a strange sight. There were two large protrusions attached to the dragon’s belly.

Those are...Krakens!

Two large, red monsters that looked like octopuses had latched on to Wishkar with their tentacles. They probably picked up on its scent.

We had lingered here for too long. Wishkar was a sitting duck, in the middle of immobilizing Valussa. It had no way of retaliating.

This was bad! I had to get rid of those Krakens! But what to do? I couldn't use most of my attacks. Wishkar would get hurt if I used a fiery explosion or electric shock. Under normal circumstances, I doubted if I could penetrate its manatech-powered barrier—my spells hadn't done much against Valussa the other day, after all. But it was probably under considerable strain right now. Water spells were likely ineffective against the Krakens' giant bodies, and underwater conditions made Wind Magic difficult to use.

Telekinetic Catapult it is.

There was a loud rumbling in the water as I launched myself at the Krakens like a torpedo. They didn't react to me at all. I didn't know if they hadn't noticed me, or if they lacked eyes to begin with. In any case, they certainly weren't going to bother evading. I understood why once I made contact with them. Their hide looked soft, but was actually as tough as thick rubber. Underneath that gelatinous hide lay flexible muscle, reinforced with mana. The creature easily absorbed the impact of the Telekinetic Catapult.

Tch!

I was hoping to pierce through both of them, but was stopped in my tracks by the first. I was lodged inside the giant squid, however, and I saw my chance to attack it from within.

How about some grilled Kraken?

I burned my surroundings with Flame Magic. The surrounding moisture was no match for mana-generated flame. I thought about moving through the Kraken's body to absorb its crystal, but it convulsed more violently. Its flesh was burned away and seawater rushed inside.

Wh-what's going on?

I was caught up in the torrent and ejected out of the beast's body. I felt like I was being tumbled around in a washing machine. I couldn't tell up from down. I caught a glimpse of light and went to it. The sunlight that broke through the surface of the water became my guiding star.

I-I made it somehow.

I was hovering a few meters off the surface of the sea.

Now I see it. Wishkar's fighting back!

I had a better vantage point now and could see Wishkar fighting off the Krakens. I couldn't tell whether its newly found vigor was due to Marle calling off the seal or me attacking the Kraken. The Sea Dragon bared its fangs and the Krakens looked terrified. With them weakened, Wishkar turned its attention toward me. I barely missed getting bitten to pieces. I didn't blame it; it couldn't tell whether I was friend or foe.

I worked together with Wishkar, and we soon killed one of the Krakens. It had a high Life value, but all I had to do was destroy its crystal. The Sea Dragon mangled the other one with its jaws, and the situation was under control.

However, this meant that Valussa was now free to move. I turned my attention toward the other Sea Dragon. Valussa craned its proud neck over the waters and let out a shrill roar.

"Krrrrroooooo!"

That sounded bad. We might end up with a Sea Dragon fight on our hands. I had to return to Fran, fast! I floated back to her side, and she grabbed me by the hilt. To everyone present, it only looked like she was using her Dimension Magic to control me.

Welcome back.

Yep. Things are looking bad down there.

Marle was looking uncharacteristically frantic. "Fran! The Valussa is running amok!" she said.

"Hm. What should we do?" Fran asked.

"Either get the rat bastard to stop it or destroy the Dragon Enhancer on board the ship!"

The Dragon Enhancer was the manatech used to supply mana to the Sea Dragons. Marle was tight-lipped about it, but she couldn't afford to be confidential in the current situation. She told Fran what the Dragon Enhancer looked like and where it was located. Worst case scenario: we might have to kill Valussa afterward.

"I'm counting on you, Fran."

"Hm!"

The *Algieba* was already suffering heavy damage. One of its masts was broken, and it was only a matter of time before the Beastman ship

sunk to the bottom of the ocean.

“Come on, Jet!”

“Grr!”

We rushed to the Valussa at top speed.

“Krrrrr...”

It sees us!

This was a great stroke of luck. Now that we had Valussa’s attention, the *Algieba* might have a chance.

“Kroooooo!”

Careful, Jet!

“Woof!”

Valussa fired its dragon breath on us. It wasn’t a stream of fire, however. Its breath attack was like a high-pressure water cannon. The stream advanced rapidly toward Jet, but he had no trouble avoiding such a straightforward attack. He had already dodged a storm of arrows, after all. Although it missed, I could feel the power of Valussa’s water breath.

“Woof!”

“Krrrr!”

Jet shot shadow spells at Valussa’s face. It didn’t do much damage, but it definitely made it angry. Valussa now added water spells to its repertoire of attacks, but Jet dodged them, too, still pelting the beast’s face with shadow spells. We let Jet distract Valussa, while Fran and I quietly land on the deck.

“Krrrrr!”

“Grrrrr!”

Valussa was now completely preoccupied.

“Black Lightning Princess! You’re back!”

“Hm. How’d it go?”

Mordred and his party were on the deck of the Sea Dragon. It looked like he had successfully beaten Varthez. Suarez was still lying in his metal shackles. His body was covered with wounds. They looked like spear wounds, and I guessed that Mordred had kept busy while we

were away. The adventurer wasn't one for sadism, so there must've been some reason.

"This bastard did a number on us!" Mordred shouted, pointing at Suarez.

"Heh. He heh..."

I couldn't quite see his face, but I knew it was Suarez. His eyes hadn't lost their arrogance. If anything, he was smirking smugly at this predicament.

"Mordred, what happened?"

"Well—"

After we left, Mordred ordered Suarez to stop the Sea Dragon. Suarez started his incantation, but then he pulled a fast one. Suarez ordered Valussa to go wild. Mordred beat Suarez to get him to revoke the order, but the desperate man stood his ground. He seemed ready to die for it. We wanted to keep him alive. We needed him to stop Valussa. The worst part of this predicament was that Valussa was free now. The berserking Sea Dragon could do what it wanted.

"What now?"

"The best way would be to get him to revoke the order."

"True."

I didn't think that was going to work, though.

"I'll go look for the Dragon Enhancer."

"That's the manatech?"

"Hm. I know where it is."

"Alright. I'll keep working on Suarez."

"Hm!"

Hopefully, Mordred and his party could get Suarez to stop Valussa. Otherwise, we would have to destroy the manatech and kill the Sea Dragon.

"I'll leave him to you."

"Yeah. You be careful out there."

Fran made her way to the ship's lower decks. There were no enemies left, and we reached our destination in a manner of minutes.

Our nerves stood on end every time the ship rocked.

This is the one!

“Really? There’s nothing inside.”

The room looked like an ordinary store, but there should be a hidden door that led to the manatech. Marle said we should check the walls, and I spotted a suspiciously empty space on the other side of the room. Suarez was the only one who could open it, but Marle had told us an easy way of breaking in.

“Haa!”

Fran cut it into pieces. Marle was right. The wall was a bit hard, but it was nothing that I couldn’t handle. Fran kicked the last of it in.

“There’s something weird here.”

That’s it! That’s the thing we’re looking for!

We stepped into the room. A giant machine was enshrined in its center. The device looked otherworldly—like a cross between magic and machine. The first thing that caught my eye was a delicate white pedestal holding a large crystal. The pedestal looked to be carved out of bone, perhaps ivory or the rib of some animal. It had six clawlike protrusions, which held up a sparkling blue crystal. It looked like something out of a fantasy novel.

The pedestal was surrounded with a metal cage. At first glance, the thing reminded me of a modified sports car, like the pipes leading out of an engine into the modified muffler. This manatech looked like a cross between a fantasy and cyberpunk device.

“Hrm...”

That’s a lot of mana.

The room was built to dampen it, and the machine’s powerful mana signature could not be felt from the outside. I wondered if we could take it with us. It seemed like such a waste to just destroy it. Surely, the Sea Dragon would be severely weakened if I put this thing into Pocket Dimension? No, that wasn’t going to happen. It was top-secret Seedrun manatech, after all. The fact that even we wanted to take it meant that it had to be destroyed. If we stole it, Seedrun might come after us. Besides, I doubted Fran would let me do anything that might anger Sellimea and Miriam.

We'll place a Beacon here for now. Let's head back to the top deck.

"Hm."

Beacon was a dimension spell that would allow us to ping back here. I wanted to see if Mordred made any progress on Suarez before destroying the Dragon Enhancer.

But before I could set the Beacon up, the ship rocked violently. The walls creaked as if they were in pain, and the shaking went on for several minutes.

"Earthquake?" Fran asked.

It can't be! We're on a ship! Come on, we have to go back to the deck!

"Hm!"

We rushed back up, worried about what was going on. When we arrived, we saw the source of all the commotion.

What the hell is that?!

"A giant octopus tentacle?"

No, that's a Kraken!

"I see."

They were after Valussa, too.

"Krrrrrooooo!"

Tentacles as thick as tree trunks wrapped around Valussa's back and neck to choke it.

"There's a lot of them down there," Fran said.

Five, I think.

Can Valussa kill them?

I don't know...

Wishkar's earlier encounter showed me that, individually, the Krakens were no match for a Sea Dragon. But a swarm of C-Threats made for a terrifying foe. Still, Valussa was aggressive enough that it could take on a number of them at once. The problem only came after it defeated the first swarm. These waters were called the Kraken's Nest for a reason, and by the looks of it, the Krakens were entering into a feeding frenzy.

We can probably get out of here while they're busy killing each other.

We'd lose Valussa, but at least we still had Suarez.

"Alright. Let's go back to the *Algieba*."

"We're all ready for transport," said the cadets. "Can you take care of it?"

Good initiative. Even Fran's students had made it out of the scramble in one piece. Some of the *Algieba*'s fighters had lost their lives, but that was to be expected. It was a sad loss, but that was the risk of being a foot soldier. I opened a Dimension Gate to the *Algieba*'s deck, and everyone went through. The last ones on the Valussa's deck were Fran and Mordred.

"After you."

"Hang on," Mordred said. "Let me stall this Sea Dragon for a little longer."

"What's the plan?"

"You'll see," Mordred said, taking out a bottle containing a poisonous-looking brown liquid.

Even if it weren't poison, I could guarantee that it wouldn't taste good. I Identified the concoction, and it seemed that it greatly boosted your mana and proficiency with Steel Magic.

"There goes a year's worth of savings," said Mordred.

"It's that expensive?"

"It's the price you pay for amazing results with no side effects."

How much did a B-Rank save in a year? I estimated a cool five million at least. But if the potion was as strong as it seemed, it was worth the price. Mordred drained the contents, and I felt his mana swell. He started casting. It was a long spell, especially considering that he had Speedcast... It must be extremely powerful. I could feel him focusing his mana.

"Vulcanus Order!"

Mordred unleashed the powerful Steel Spell. His target was the ship's gigantic anchors. The spell instantly transformed them into long and slender shapes, as if they were made of molding clay. The two steel rods spiraled together like a helix as if they were alive. Finally, they took the form of a metal snake over twenty meters in length.

I guessed that Mordred could only control this much metal

because of the potion. He sent the metal snake at both the Sea Dragon and Krakens. The steel python wrapped itself around them all to bind them. The anchors were initially constructed out of hard metal, and with Mordred's magic reinforcing it, even a Sea Dragon would have a hard time escaping its clutches.

"That should hold them for a while."

"Steel Magic is so cool."

"Right? But I don't think it's going to last very long against those beasts. We should get going."

"Hm."

Fran and Mordred walked through the portal. The crew of the *Algieba* cheered as they returned.

"Alright, you scallywags! Full speed ahead!" Jerome shouted.

Despite its broken mast, the *Algieba* still had its propulsion devices. We weren't completely dead in the water.

Looks like we can make it out.

I looked back to the Valussa where a full-scale giant monster battle was now taking place. Valussa bit and shot at the Krakens with its breath, but it was having trouble moving in the grip of Mordred's steel serpent. Even if its attacks managed to land, more and more Krakens lashed out to pull it under. Their bodies were soft by nature, and they were less affected by the metal snake.

"Krrrrr!" Valussa roared pitifully. The chains that held it to the ship stopped it from complete freedom of movement.

"There's more of them now."

Our ship wouldn't last a minute out there.

More Krakens appeared from beneath, attracted by the blood and noise. Jerome shouted again, giving the order to retreat.

Teacher, I see something. Over there. Fran pointed out across the water.

What...? No. No no no. YOU'RE KIDDING! I wished it was nothing but a bad dream. *We're in big trouble now!* What the hell was that thing doing here?! I thought the Krakens were the biggest thing that lived in these waters! *Fran! We have to tell everyone!*

“Hm. Big one incoming!”

“Big wha—WHAT?!”

The crew had my exact reaction.

“What?!”

“Is that for real...?!”

“Looks real enough to me!”

“Oh, gods!”

Didn't think we'd meet again, and here of all places!

It wasn't something I could forget. Brown tubular body mottled with red dots. A head with teeth like an anemone. It might as well be the root of all fear. The Maritime Monstrosity. Midgardsormr.

It's one thing after another, I swear!

The Sormr's body rocketed through the waters. Fortunately, it wasn't swimming toward the *Algieba* yet. It was closing in on the Valussa. I expected it to join the frenzy.

“Huh? The Midgardsormr disappeared.”

Did it dive...?

I thought it was after the Sea Dragon and Krakens. I craned my neck and saw that the Sea Worm had returned.

“Gyagogogoooo!”

It popped out of the water and gobbled up the Krakens and the Sea Dragon as if to show off its power. Its gigantic mouth and length easily accommodated all of its prey. It even carried the Sea Dragon vessel effortlessly on its back. The large ship was nothing compared to this beast, and the ship cracked in two as it fell into the waters.

“What the hell was that?!”

“Do not fall into the water!”

The Midgardsormr crashed down and unleashed great waves on the *Algieba*. We were all hanging on for our lives.

“Set thrusters to full speed!”

“Aye, Captain!”

“What the hell is that monster doing here?!”

“Here it comes again!”

The Sormr had reared its ugly head back up above the surface. Within its pulsing jaws were the tentacles of Krakens and the head of a Sea Dragon.

“Krrr...” Valussa whined.

It was a disconcerting sound, coming from a monster that could easily destroy a capital state. The Sea Dragon was done for.

“Gyooooo!”

The Midgardsormr roared, proclaiming its victory.

“Crap...take us out of here! Hurry!”

“Doing our best, Captain!”

“Can we outrun it, Captain?”

“I don’t know. It’s faster than we are. The best we can hope for is that it gets distracted by other Krakens...”

The Midgardsormr didn’t really chew its food. It gobbled up its prey and let its digestive system do the rest. That was how it hunted: once all the food in the vicinity was gone, it went to a different hunting ground as it digested. The Krakens, Valussa, and the Valussa’s men could buy us a few minutes of extra time, at best, but it didn’t look like we were even going to get a moment’s repose.

“It saw us.”

It’s coming for us next.

The Midgardsormr surveyed its surroundings before fixing on us. The *Algieba* was the biggest thing for miles. The animal’s instincts ordered it to attack us. The Midgardsormr launched itself toward us.

“Fran! We need you to get in the air!” Jerome approached us with men carrying a barrel.

“What do you need?”

“This barrel is loaded with a concoction that Sormrs love.”

Well, that was convenient.

“I need you to dump it as far away from the *Algieba* as you can.”

“Alright.”

“I just hope that thing falls for it.”

Jerome normally used this method at a greater distance. Hopefully, with the Sormr occupied with Valussa and the Krakens, it would work at closer range. That said, the captain didn't know for sure.

Let's try.

"Hm. Come on, Jet."

"Bark!"

Fran stored the barrel and rode Jet at full speed toward the incoming Sormr. When we dropped the barrel, it broke open upon impact, scattering the concoction within. I couldn't smell it myself, but Fran winced at how strong it was.

Well?

"Hm...nope."

The Midgardsormr didn't even stop.

Dammit.

The presence of the *Algieba* was far more appealing. The Midgardsormr ignored the barrel and made a beeline for the ship. From above, the thing looked like it came out of a monster movie.

Attack it and see if you can grab its attention.

"Hm! Thunder Bolt!"

"Grrrr!"

Flare Blast!

We fired one spell after another at the thing's back. I was hoping it would draw its attention, but...

It's ignoring us! These attacks were useless. How about this? Thor's Hammer!

A blast of electricity exploded against the Midgardsormr's back. The lightning tore into its flesh and damaged it, but the worm showed no signs of stopping. It was more interested in food than fending off its enemies.

What do we do, Teacher?

I dunno...might as well keep attacking and hope something works.

I didn't think we could beat the monster, but I didn't see any other option. We had to hit it hard and force it to stop. The last time we

fought a Midgardsormr, our best efforts barely slowed it down. Hopefully, we were strong enough to stop the creature now.

We hurried back to the ship and told them of our plan. The exertion would probably take Fran out of commission for the rest of the voyage.

“Don’t be stupid! There’s no way you can beat that thing!”

“Maybe I can slow it down.”

“Perhaps... No, you’re definitely the only one who has a chance out there...”

“I’ll handle it.”

“Promise me you’ll come back alive...”

“An adventurer’s life is her greatest asset.”

“A textbook answer! Ha! Alright! Godspeed!”

“Hm!”

Our plan was simple. We would hit the Midgardsormr with everything we had. When we were done, Jet could just carry us back.

Jet, focus on getting Fran back safe and sound.

“Woof.”

Worse come to worst, I would take matters into my own hands. We focused all of our mana on the Midgardsormr.

Here we go!

“Hm! Awaken! Flashing Thunderclap!” Fran opened with her strongest move. Black lightning covered her body and the static electricity made Jet’s fur stand on end.

Go for the face to get its attention.

“Got it.”

“Woof.”

Wait for it to open its mouth first.

“Hm! Jet.”

“Bark bark!”

Jet slowed down and took up position in front of the Midgardsormr. We aimed where its head should be and started casting.

I'm going in.

I dove into the water and positioned myself under the creature's head, pelting it with flame and thunder spells. The giant sea serpent squirmed, unable to ignore us any longer.

For good measure... I used Telekinetic Catapult to launch myself at the creature's head. I knew it wasn't going to do much damage, but it should be enough to draw its attention.

The Sormr out a ferocious roar. I got a far better reaction than I was expecting.

“Gyobobobobo!”

The roar sent shockwaves through the water. It felt like an explosion.

Whoaaaa!

While not powerful enough to harm me, the waters churned up so much that I couldn't tell up from down. At least we had its attention, but why did it sound so angry? I hurried back to Fran's side as the Midgardsormr's eyeless gaze set on me. The creature craned its neck over the waters and glared at us with its cyclopean maw.

“What'd you do?”

I was just trying to draw its attention with a Telekinetic Catapult. I don't know why it's so pissed!

I couldn't make heads or tails of it, but Fran slapped her fist into her palm and nodded.

“I think it remembers the last time we fought it.”

The last time?

“You know, you blew its head off with a Telekinetic Catapult last time, too.”

Wait, so you're saying this is the same Midgardsormr?

“Hm.”

I...couldn't tell. Was this a special sense only beastmen had? I Identified it to make sure, but I still couldn't tell. Its Life was a lot higher than last time, that was for sure, but then Midgardsormrs didn't really stop growing so it must've eaten a lot since our last encounter. The last time we met, I filled its stomach with giant boulders.

I'm surprised this oversize worm remembers me. I guess everyone and everything could hold a grudge. Good. I still have a score to settle with you.

We escaped from our last encounter. It was time to show this thing how much stronger we'd gotten since then.

Fran, fight a while before hitting it with your strongest attacks.

"Got it."

We had a good chance of playing bait now, and I was sure Jet could transport our tired bodies back to the *Algieba* when we were done.

"Gyogyooo!"

"Haaa!"

The Midgardsormr roared menacingly, and Fran charged. She hopped through the air and cut the creature's head.

"Gyooo!"

Black lightning leaped out as I cut into it. Its low defenses were no match for us, and portions of its flesh were stripped away by the shock. With Flashing Thunderclap active, the Midgardsormr couldn't track Fran.

Get it, Fran!

"Haaaaa! Rah!"

Fran danced through the air, hopping off of the worm's body and at times even using my Telekinesis to jump. From a distance, I imagined that streaks of black light darted all over the Midgardsormr's head. I think she unleashed at least two hundred attacks. Its head was beginning to look more and more pitiful. Fran's sword and black lightning tore off great chunks of flesh, until it was riddled with holes. It looked like a sponge. Or maybe coral. Either way, we were wearing it down. But even with its head in such a state, the Midgardsormr continued to rage. It twisted its gigantic body and maintained its pressure on Fran. The deep wounds slowly but surely began to heal.

Teacher?

Okay, this isn't working.

We had only taken a fraction off the creature's Life. Chipping the giant worm to death was not a valid strategy.

Teacher, Ship-Slayer.

Roger that.

Fran had the same idea about the name. It was nice we were on the same wavelength. I Transmogrified myself.

“If chipping won’t work, then surely a big chop will.”

Agreed!

Still in the air, Fran shifted my gigantic blade and prepared her Pressurized Quickdraw. The Aerial Pressurized Quickdraw with Ship-Slayer might be our strongest attack yet.

We’ll call it the Aerial Pressurized Ship-Slayer! Hah!

“Yaaaah!”

Fran dove like a bullet and used my weight to accelerate faster. Pressure was already building up in my sheath.

“Gyooooo!”

The Midgardsormr must have felt like it was watching a giant sword fall out of the sky. The attack landed on its head with impossible speed, but I didn’t feel like I had crushed its head. In fact, there wasn’t even a faint thud. I had sharpened my blade to make sure that the attack would be a proper slice. As proof, the Sormr’s head was split in two, peeling away from its center. This attack could’ve killed the Sea Dragon if it hadn’t been reinforced by the Dragon Enhancer.

“You alright, Teacher?”

I’m fine. I’ll heal back soon enough!

Ship-Slayer took more of my Durability than I thought. It would take some time before Self-Repair could fully fix me. My blade creaked, and Fran gave me a worried look.

Did that do it...? I hope I didn’t jinx it...

“It’s still moving.”

Sure looks like it.

“Is it healing itself?”

I think so, yeah.

Our victory didn’t last long. The Midgardsormr’s wounds were already closing before our very eyes. We thought we did a lot of

damage, but the creature disagreed. The Sormr was more than capable of enduring great physical damage.

“Hrm...”

Fran was vexed. Of course she was. The thing just ate our biggest attack and it only provided a mild distraction. At least we had the creature’s full attention.

I don’t think we’ll kill it, but we have to keep attacking!

“Hm...!”

We needed to lead it a little bit farther away from the *Algieba*, but we weren’t ready for what the Sormr did next.

“Gyoroooo!”

“Wait!”

It’s going to ignore us?!

Had it given up on trying to kill us already? Perhaps it prioritized satisfying its stomach over vengeance? In any case, the Midgardsormr sped toward the *Algieba* again. We shot out a lot of spells in a panic, but they failed to slow it down.

Dammit! It’s completely focused on the Algieba now!

“What do we do?”

We’ll have to go back to our initial plan of killing it with our strongest attack.

“Hm!”

As powerful as Aerial Pressurized Ship-Slayer was, it was nothing compared to our next move. We circled round to the front of the Sormr and charged our most powerful attack. Then we waited for the perfect time to strike, masking our intentions. Surely this would be enough.

The Midgardsormr came within a hundred meters of the *Algieba* and opened its mouth. All of its previous wounds had healed.

“Gyooo!” The Midgardsormr was the world’s foremost glutton. Its gaping mouth looked more like a cave. “Gyoaaaaaaaaa!”

Now!

“Haaa!”

Fran jumped. The Midgardsormr followed suit to satisfy both its

hunger and its vengeance. Its terrifying maw turned toward the sky, as if it were trying to eat the sun. That was exactly where we wanted it. We let out our most powerful attack right into the glutton's mouth.

Kanna Kamuy!

“Black Thunderfall!”

My white lightning dragon fused with Fran's inky black lightning and drove down into the Sormr's mouth. I put as much mana into Kanna Kamuy as I could, and Fran spent all of hers, too.

The fifty-meter-long worm convulsed and exploded into blood, guts, and ash.

The explosion was so violent it looked like a missile launch. We would've been blown away if it weren't for the barrier I hurriedly set up. Waves, several dozens of meters tall, almost carried the *Algieba* away.

Crap! Are they okay? Alright, looks like they're fine.

Ironically, the Midgardsormr's thick body absorbed most of the force. The shockwaves might have capsized the *Algieba* otherwise. The big worm actually saved them.

The thing was in a gruesome state by now—no ordinary creature could survive this. A third of its upper body was blown to smithereens. Even snakes and centipedes, notorious for their durability, would've died. But leave it to an A-Threat to be tough beyond measure. The creature's magic defense was bottom of the barrel, and it didn't have much physical defense either, considering its size. But size was all it needed to survive.

Name: Midgardsormr

Race: Sea Serpent

Level: 60

HP: 28,117/39,823; Magic: 591; Strength: 4,139; Agility: 108

Skills: Absorb 2; Regenerate 2; Predator

This thing was ridiculous. The attack only took a third of its HP. To make matters worse, it was already healing itself.

Tch. This stupid trash compactor... At least have the decency to slow down!

“This is bad...”

The thing was missing its head—how was it regenerating so fast?! And it was still moving toward the *Algieba* like nothing had happened! Maybe its brain wasn’t in its head. Maybe it didn’t have a brain. Or maybe it had as many brains as it had hearts.

No, stop! Now wasn’t the time!

Jet! Cut it off again!

“Woof!”

We were at the end of our rope. I had enough mana for one more attack, but what if that wasn’t enough?

“Teacher...you okay?”

Yeah. Just take it easy, Fran. I’ll be fine.

“Hm.”

Fran was drained, too. I left her and Jet and flew off on my own. I focused my energies for another Kanna Kamuy, but I knew that it wouldn’t be as powerful as the first...

We’ll go back to the Algieba if this doesn’t work.

Then we would have to convince Jerome to abandon ship. The Wishkar was still at a reasonable distance. I could easily open a Dimension Gate to its deck. Leaving the *Algieba* would be a tough decision for Jerome, but it was better than going down with the ship.

I focused my mana, making sure to leave just enough to cast the emergency Dimension Gate, but then something happened.

Wha—?

The presence was still several kilometers away, yet I could feel its intense strength. It was something like a Dark Lord or even the Evil One himself, and it was moving in fast. The thing must’ve been moving at about five hundred kilometers an hour. And something else about it startled me.

This thing’s huge!

It was so gigantic that “huge” was the only word I could come up with. Its dorsal fin was a hundred meters long and twenty meters high. I

couldn't think of any monster that gigantic...

Jet, get us out of here!

“W-woof!”

I shot back to Fran and gave the order to retreat. Jet was terrified. He shivered like a newborn puppy with his tail between his legs. He managed to get over his flight or freeze response and darted all the way back to the *Algieba*.

“Teacher...what's that?”

I don't know... Identifying its fin didn't work.

I had a guess, though. This fish was larger and more powerful than the A-Threat Midgardsormr. I could think of only one monster that fit the bill.

“Teacher...look.”

I knew it!

The unknown monster closed in on the Midgardsormr and attacked.

“Gaoooooooo!”

Its jaws clamped around the Sormr and held it high in the sky like a trophy.

Its head was close to a hundred meters long, and its neck was serpentine like a dragon. It had scales like polished jade and horns like carved amethyst. Its eyes were brilliant rubies, and there seemed to be two in each socket. The creature's divine beauty took my breath away.

Name: Leviathan

Race: Ocean God Dragon. Godbeast.

Level: 87

HP: 92,336; Magic: 36,887; Strength: 18,139; Agility: 3,123

Skills: Unknown

Lore: Unknown

Ha. Ha ha ha ha...

I could only laugh at this ludicrous situation. This was an S-Threat monster. A beast that had the ability to destroy the whole world. Its immense power made it impossible to fully Identify, but one look was enough to tell me that it was on a whole other level. I could never even build up the will to fight it. Such was the overwhelming power of a Godbeast.



I started thinking of ways to get Fran off the *Algieba* and leave the ship to fend for itself. My chance would come when the Leviathan started moving again, but then the strangest thing happened. I didn't feel a trace of hostility from the Godbeast. Maybe it didn't think us worth bothering about. Was it giving us a chance to escape? That didn't seem right, either.

Huh...?

A strange feeling welled up in my heart. Was I going crazy with fear? The feeling threatened to overwhelm me. Irritation, impatience, sentimentality, desolation... Those were the words that came closest, but they still felt off the mark. Perhaps a better word was nostalgia—if I had tears to shed, I would be bawling.

As I was lost in a storm of emotions, I felt the Leviathan's piercing gaze. Why was it looking at me? I was so confused I didn't know what to do. All I could do was return its gaze.

Eventually, the Leviathan turned back and disappeared into the deep. I thought I saw the faint glimpse of a smile in its eyes. Maybe I was reading too much into it. After all, I was so desperate not to be eaten. The giant god of the oceans dove into the abyss with the Midgardsormr in its jaws. When the waves subsided, there was nothing but a deafening stillness. Slowly, we returned to our senses.

We're...saved?

"Hm..."

"Woof..."

Fran and Jet were exhausted and at a loss for words.

Our return trip to the *Algieba* was a quiet one. Jet fluttered back on deck and we found that the crew was in no better shape than us. They reacted to the disappearance of the Leviathan in different ways. Some stared at the Godbeast's last known location in shocked silence, some laughed like lunatics, while others prayed to the heavens. Captain Jerome was laughing, though his laughter was more restrained than that of his men.

Surprisingly, the Leviathan's waves didn't capsize the ship...which didn't make sense, now that I thought about it. The giant dragon's body barely caused any waves as it left. Was it actively trying to protect the *Algieba*? That was unlikely. If anything, it probably used some kind of

Skill to reduce its water resistance and swim faster. We probably got really lucky.

Mordred was the first to recover his senses, followed by Jerome and Buffet. Fran had to coax them into waking up. The last hour had traumatized Mordred. His voice wavered as he spoke. "I broke into a life's worth of cold sweat... I have no idea how my heart didn't stop... I'm not going through this again! We're taking time off of ship duty!"

We'd been caught in a battle between Sea Dragons, Krakens, and a Midgardsormr. Our savior turned out to be the S-Threat Godbeast Leviathan itself, and even then that was purely accidental. Mordred was right to be terrified. Meanwhile, Suarez looked even more haggard than before. His cheeks had sunken significantly.

Jerome was practically screaming. He leaned over the railing and stared at the water. "What the hell was that?! Tell me you saw that! You saw it, too, right?! Tell me I'm not crazy!"

"Yes, Captain, I saw it, too... What was that thing doing here...? But...no..." The first mate muttered to himself in disbelief.

Fran approached Jerome. "I thought you said the Leviathan lived in the Enchanted Ocean?"

Jerome frowned and gave it some thought. "That's in the past now, by the looks of it."

That was the only answer he had. The Leviathan was still a monster after all, and we couldn't understand what it was thinking. It had previously only been sighted in the Enchanted Ocean, but there was no guarantee the legendary creature would stay there—especially as people rarely passed there now. Maybe it left to look for food. Maybe it just decided to change its address. Who knows? Considering how fast the Leviathan moved, it could go anywhere it wanted. It might have only been sighted in the Enchanted Ocean, but there was no reason to suppose that the beast couldn't lurk elsewhere.

One thing was for sure: these waters would make it very difficult for the Leviathan to move about. I remembered its gigantic face—it was close to a hundred meters long from its neck to the tip of its snout, and forty to fifty meters from the top of its crown to its chin. At their deepest, these waters were only about three hundred meters. This was not an area where the gigantic Leviathan could easily move. I imagined its belly was practically grazing against the bottom of the ocean. All

things considered, what happened to us might as well have been a miracle.

“As I was saying, let’s get out of here!”

“This is our chance. The Krakens have fled in fear.”

Looks like the Wishkar’s doing all right.

“Hm.”

The Sea Dragon was several miles away from the *Algieba*.

“What do we do with this guy?” Having regained his composure, Mordred tapped Suarez with the tip of his boot. The tyrant had fainted during Mordred’s beatdown.

“I’ll take him to the Wishkar,” said Fran.

“That’s for the best.”

“Thanks, Fran.”

Suarez still had royal blood. Jerome and the others couldn’t really do anything more to him without risking repercussions. I didn’t see a point to letting him live, though. Suarez’s only worth was his ability to control his Sea Dragon. Now that dragon was in the belly of a Midgardsormr—which itself was in the belly of the Leviathan. Suarez was pretty much worthless.

Perhaps his royal blood gave him some worth, but his temperament made it liable to backfire. I had to agree with Marle. The rat bastard was worthless. In fact, what with everything we went through to capture him, his value was a significant negative. Fran took Suarez by his feet and climbed onto Jet’s back.

Hanging upside-down with his blood gathering in his head, he soon woke up. “Wh-what is the meaning of this?! What are you doing, girl!”

“...”

“Say something! I command you! Let me go! Do you know who I am?!”

“...”

“Don’t ignore me, girl!”

Fran had no time for his nonsense. She made no attempt to humor him, but Suarez kept yapping away. Without warning, she let go of his

feet. Suarez's head plunged into the sea.

"Gyaaaah!"

"Teacher."

Sure thing.

I used Telekinesis to hold Suarez several inches over the surface of the water. I stopped his freefall and brought him back to Fran.

"..."

Fran grabbed him by the legs again, and this time Suarez didn't say a word. When we reached the Wishkar, an exhausted Marle came to greet us.

"You're here..."

"You alright?"

"All things considered, very much so, thank you."

The loss of one of her kingdom's Sea Dragons, followed by the sudden appearance of a Leviathan, had taken their toll on Marle. Her young shoulders were hunched over and she looked absolutely haggard.

"Marle! You traitor! You sided with the usurper against me!"

"Silence, rat bastard."

"What did you call me! I don't remember authorizing you as captain of a Sea Dragon! Going against the word of the king is a capital offense!"

This guy was unbelievable. He was still claiming the throne after all that had happened. Did he lack the capacity to learn? Suarez might be the most stubborn and foolish human I'd ever met.

"*Former* king. You are now nothing more than a common criminal."

"To hell with you! How dare you address me in such a manner!"

"You're the one that's going to hell. Ah, but what am I doing? I'm wasting my time talking to an idiot."

"What?! I am Suarez, the King of Seedrun! And I hereby sentence you to death!"

"By gods, you're annoying. I can't believe a mad fool had the throne. How shameful."

Marle cast a spell. The next moment, a sheet of ice had covered Suarez's mouth.

"!!!...?"

"Now be quiet."

His nostrils weren't covered, so I guessed he could still breathe.

"Now, then. I suppose I may receive this rat bastard?"

"Hm. We don't need him."

"Ha! Who does? But as much as I would love to throw him overboard, I can't. We'll keep him locked away in cold storage. Keep a close eye on him, you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Bike saluted Marle and carried Suarez away.

"You've done a great many things for us this day. I'll hold up my end of the bargain and invite the Beastman Nationals to the negotiating table."

"Hm..."

"It pains me that we lost Valussa, but at least we caught the rat."

"Hm..."

"My sister will be well pleased. I'll tell her of your involvement."

"Hm..."

Fran was nodding off as Marle still talked. I couldn't tell whether she heard anything the princess said. She was very sleepy after using all of her mana. But Fran liked Marle and wanted to talk to her. Still, she had her limits.

"Are you alright, Fran? You seem tired."

"Hm...I'm fine."

No, you're not.

"I still have much to talk about, but you should go back to your ship and rest."

"Thanks."

"I'll make sure the rat bastard stays in his cage."

"Hm."

"We'll talk again soon."

With her mission accomplished, Marle was free to leave, but it sounded like the Wishkar was going to escort the *Algieba* for a little while longer. Fran waved goodbye and returned to the *Algieba* where Jerome and the others welcomed her happily. Unfortunately, Fran was already falling asleep.

Mordred noticed what was happening and tossed Fran a lifeboat. “Captain, the Black Lightning Princess is exhausted. We should let her rest.”

“Whoops! Sorry about that!”

“Only natural after all those powerful attacks. She won’t be of much use in battle for now. Go back to your room and get some sleep, Fran.”

“Hm...”

Jet stayed behind on deck in her stead. With his detection skills and Mordred’s abilities, we wouldn’t have to worry about an ambush.

Counting on you, Jet.

“Thanks.”

“Woof!”

Fran returned to her room and did her signature dive onto the bed. Her cute breathing soon followed. “Zzzz.”

And she’s gone. Hmm, what now?

She’d fallen asleep with me still attached to her back. I didn’t mind, of course, but I didn’t think she could get a restful night with a heavy sword pressing against her back. She might end up getting nightmares. I quietly floated out of my sheath. Fran stirred slightly, noticing the change in weight.

Did I wake you?

“Zzz.”

Good. She was resting easy now.

Good night, Fran.

Epilogue

TWO DAYS HAD PASSED since our encounter with the Leviathan.

“Drop the anchor!”

“Aye aye, Captain!”

“Can somebody please inform a government official that we have arrangements for diplomatic negotiations with a foreign country?”

“It’ll be a mouthful, but I’ll deliver the message, First Mate Buffet!”

The *Algieba* landed safely on the continent of Chrome. We were now at the Beastman National port, Grayseal. It was a sizable town, though not as big as Bulbola.

The adventurers received their bonuses and disembarked. While no amount of compensation was enough for facing down a monster like a Midgardsormr, it was still a significant bonus. Fran received a special payment of a hundred thousand Gault, and we said our goodbyes to the three rookie adventurers.

“Thank you, Master.”

“We learned a lot from you.”

“We promise to be a lot stronger the next time we meet!”

“Hm.”

“Goodbye!”

“Thanks again!”

“We’ll be on our way.”

The lessons they’d learned over the course of a few days would bear much fruit. They even helped Fran kill some free time. But I couldn’t tell whether Fran acknowledged them as her pupils. She didn’t seem the least bit lonely. Did she even remember their names?

Come on, Fran.

We needed to get going, but she called out to her three temporary trainees.

“Miguel, Naria, Riddick. Hang on.”

“Huh?”

“Did Master just call us by name?”

“I-I think so.”

“See you soon.” Fran waved her small hand.

Their faces lit up and they bowed deeply. “Yes!”

I’d never seen such a proper bow in my life. They were really happy. Satisfied by their response, Fran turned and went her own way without looking back.

I’m surprised you remembered, Fran.

Hm. They’re my students.

I was glad to see Fran growing up. *Good for you, rookies.* It wasn’t a one-way relationship after all.

“This is goodbye, Fran.”

She turned her attention to Marle, captain of the Sea Dragon Wishkar.

“You’ve helped us so much on this voyage,” Marle said. “Thank you.”

“You helped us out, too.”

“Perhaps, but I think you could’ve avoided a whole chain of battles if you didn’t help us.”

Marle was right. We wouldn’t have needed to fight so hard if we’d declined Marle’s offer and gone straight to the Beastman Nation. But then again, things might have ended worse for us. We might have run into the Valussa again, and the *Algieba* might have been gobbled up by the Midgardsormr. In the end, that crazy voyage was the best we could have asked for.

“I made it to the Beastman Nation in one piece. That’s all that matters.”

“I see.”

“Hm.”

That was the most important thing to Fran. Besides, we even had a Sea Dragon escort us during the latter half of our voyage.

“Well, I must be going now,” Marle said. “I need to hurry back to Seedrun.”

“I see.”

“Promise me you’ll visit the next time you’re there. We’d be pleased to welcome you.”

“Okay. It’s a promise. I’ll come hang out.”

“Ha ha ha. Yes. Let’s hang out.”

Marle put out her hand and Fran shook it vigorously—lonely, now that she had to say goodbye.

“See you soon.”

“Indeed. Goodbye.”

Fran and Marle smiled at each other. Such warmth was a luxury for Marle the cold commander and Fran the expressionless adventurer.

“We’ll meet again, friend.”

“Hm!”

With that final goodbye, Marle went on her way.

“Are you done, Black Lightning Princess?”

“Hm. Kept you waiting?”

Mordred had been ready for a while, but he waited to let the two friends say their goodbyes. Strong *and* a gentleman? He really must be popular with the ladies. “Not really. Shall we?”

He had promised to guide us to the Adventurer’s Guild to receive the reward for the guard quest.

“There it is.”

“It’s big.”

“Needs to be, to cover this port town.”

The Grayseal Adventurer’s Guild was a short walk away from the harbor. The building was quite large, but then it was the only place in town that adventurers could sign on escort duty for ships. We walked through the doors and found a crowded tavern in front of the reception desk. The adventurers scowled at Fran, but they soon changed their minds once they saw who was behind her. Mordred must’ve been well-known in the guild. Even a little Black Cat girl must have been worth

something if she was with him. At least we didn't have to worry about rowdiness this time.

However, a man came sauntering forward. "Hey there, Mordred..." The man grinned casually. He was middle-aged with stubble and looked to be on the leaner side. I was expecting the typical foolishness, but it never came. "Where did you get your hands on such young talent? Girl looks like she's dragging you and not the other way round."

"Hello, Leeroy. We just happened to share the same boat. It's her first time in town."

"You don't say? The name's Leeroy, little lady. I'm an adventurer in these parts."

"D-Rank with a really sharp memory. He's got the whole map of the area in his head, so he's the one we go to when we need directions." If Mordred found him reliable, he must be more trustworthy than he looked.

"Hm. C-Rank adventurer, Fran."

"A C-Rank? At your age?! That's something else!"

Leeroy's eyes widened, but Mordred only flashed a wry smile. He had witnessed Fran's blatant rank fraud firsthand.

"You should really come up with a better introduction."

"Why?" Fran asked. "It's the truth."

"Sure, but...you could at least introduce yourself as the Black Lightning Princess?"

Leeroy yelped in surprise. "What? This girl's the Black Lightning Princess?"

"That's right."

"Well, I never! You're even stronger than I thought!"

Rumors about the Black Lightning Princess had reached Grayseal via the traders. I understood what Mordred meant—Leeroy immediately knew who Fran was from her nickname. It was a better way of avoiding fights and misunderstandings. But there was one great danger: a chance encounter with an idiot who had never heard of her before. Her nickname might be mistaken for arrogance. I didn't mind being made a fool of, but I wasn't going to let that happen to Fran. Thanks, Mordred,

but we'd stick to C-Rank adventurer for now.

Fortunately, the mere mention of the Black Lightning Princess had a significant effect.

"Seriously?!"

"That's the Black Lightning Princess?"

"Black Lightning Princess? Where?"

"What?!"

"S-she's real!"

The pub was thrown into a ruckus and all the adventurers spoke at once. There were even those who braved Mordred's Intimidation and came to get a closer look. Even the adventurers in Bulbola didn't react like this. Then again, ninety percent of the adventurers here were beastmen. I supposed they had a great respect for the Black Lightning Princess. She was the first Black Cat to achieve Evolution, after all. There was also the fact that she had defeated one of the beastmen's national heroes, A-Rank Gaudartha.

"That's the girl who beat Sir Gaudartha?"

"That's what I hear, and I heard it straight from a royal trader. I don't think he'd lie about that."

"What then, Gaudartha just gave her the fight?"

"So she's a charity case."

"Oh, get real. This is Sir Gaudartha we're talking about."

"Yeah. I highly doubt he would shame himself by losing to a child."

"Never mind that. You ever seen him hold back in a fight?"

"Nope! You need a squad of healers just to spar with the guy!"

Quite a few of them thought Gaudartha gave Fran the win. I couldn't blame them. You had to be there to believe it. Adventurers surrounded Fran even as we finished our quest obligations. They watched her with awe.

"She's really Evolved..."

"Sure is."

"How'd she do it?"

“I think the merchants said you had to beat a lot of Fiends. I wasn’t paying attention since I thought it was a load of bull.”

We’d turned off Stealth Evolution when we got here. We needed everyone to know that a Black Cat had successfully Evolved. The Evolution conditions were slowly spreading—the Beast King had kept his word. It would spread a lot faster now that Fran was here as living proof.

We got our money from the guild and left, feeling the gaze of dozens on her back.

Let’s look for a place to stay. We need to look up where the capital is, too.

Hm.

What adventures awaited us in this country? I only hoped that Fran would meet a lot of good people on the way.

Afterword

“**D**ID YOU HEAR, dear?”

“About what, madam?”

“There are three whole pages of afterword in this volume!”

“My goodness, are you sure?”

“Very sure, yes. It was in the email the writer got from his editor, I-san. Three pages of afterword, it said!”

“I can’t believe it!”

“Well, believe it, sister.”

“I mean, after that farce of an afterword in the last volume? The editor knows that this writer can’t do afterwords!”

“I know! History is already repeating itself!”

“Oh, what a good-for-nothing writer he is!”

“Yes, I can’t believe it!”

“Neither can I!”

“Wait... Oh, that fiend!”

“Wh-what is it, madam?”

“He’s using us as padding!”

“What crooked writing methods! The nerve of him!”

“Indeed! Such a fiend, indeed!”

“Why, look at the lines he’s wasted by typing out this nonsense!”

“Stop it, you barbarian! How dare you use us to hit your afterword quota?!”

“A beast! A fiendish beast!”

“We will have no more of this! Stop it this instant!”

Yeah okay, I’ll stop now.

Hello, all. It's Yuu Tanaka again, and I'm still having trouble with the afterword, thanks to messing up the page adjustments. Lady A and Lady B have nothing to do with the story. They will not be appearing in the books.

Probably.

The characters return to the sea in this volume, and a lot has changed from the web edition—including the introduction of some new characters. I hope you enjoyed it, because it sure was tough to write.

That said—wow, seven volumes. It's taken the support of so many people to continue the series this long. Please allow me to extend my heartfelt thanks.

To my editor, I-san—sorry for always pushing the deadline before submission. I love you for putting up with all my nonsense.

Llo, you're an absolute god of an illustrator.

Maruyama, who's drawing the manga, you're the best.

To all my friends and family who continue to support this deadbeat author, I wouldn't be here without you.

And, of course, to everyone involved in the publishing process and all of my readers—thank you very much.

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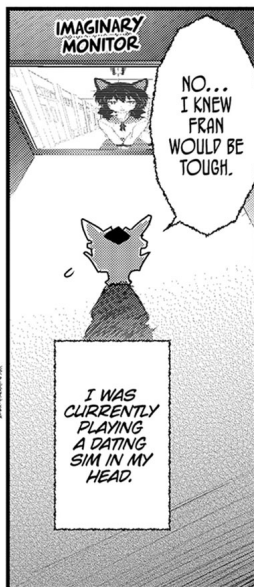
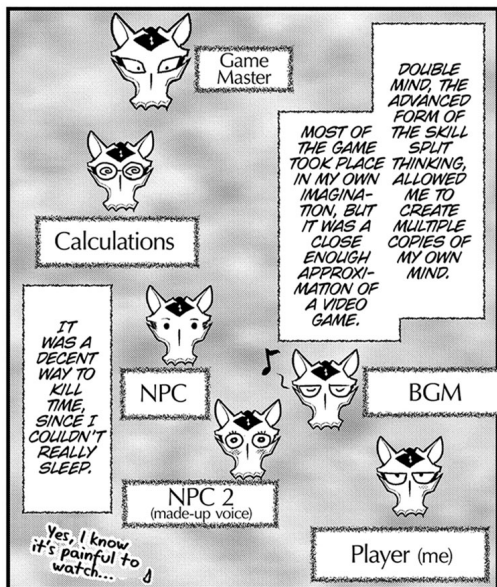
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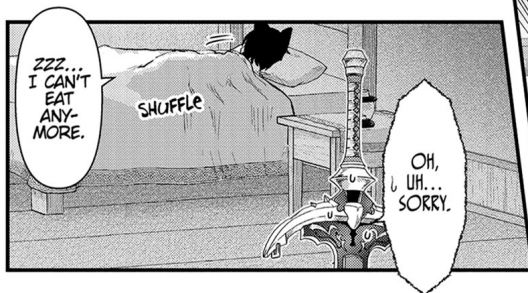
Game Night

STORY: Yuu Tanaka
ILLUSTRATION: Tomowo Maruyama



Sorry, Teacher-kun. I only see you as someone who gives me food...





I'm so out of touch with these combos...



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